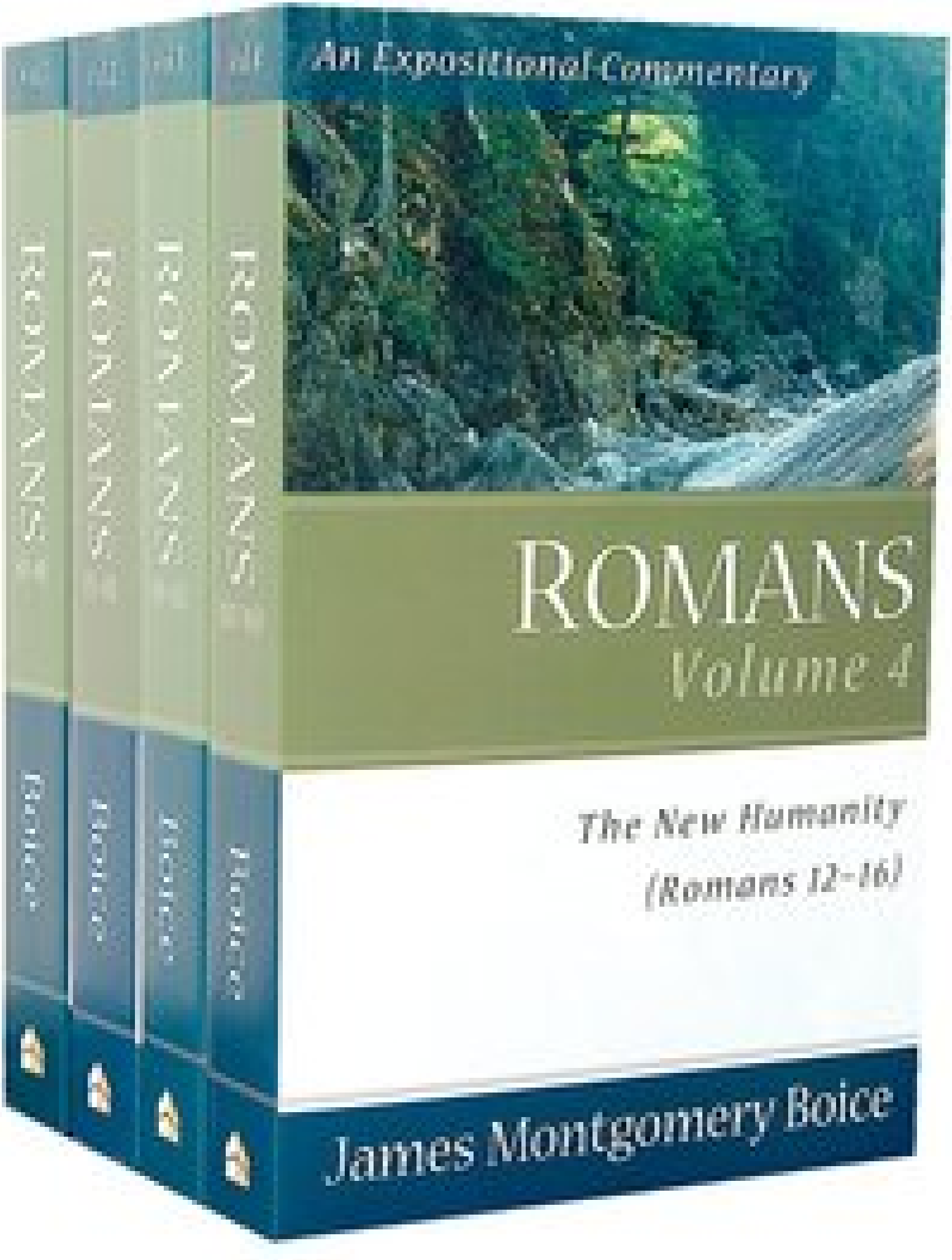
An Expositional Commentary
ROMANS
Volume 4
The New Humanity
(Romans 12–16)
James Montgomery Boice
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Romans, Volume 1
Justification by Faith (Romans 1-4)

To HIM who was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification

Preface

It is a formidable task to begin a study of Paul's great letter to the Romans, and exciting, too. I felt those emotions as I began these studies nearly four years ago, and I still feel them. Perhaps you feel them also, perhaps even as you hold this book in your hand and read this preface.

There are very good reasons for these feelings. For one thing, Romans has probably been the object of more intense study by more highly intelligent and motivated individuals than any document in human history. A document like the United States Constitution has also been intensely studied, of course. But interest in even so important a document as that is confined largely to one nation, while Romans has been of profound interest to people wherever Christianity has spread. Romans has been studied by many millions of persons and for nearly two millennia, that is, from the time of the apostle Paul, its author and the first great missionary of the Christian church, to the present.

The list of the most monumental and helpful commentators on Romans is a virtual history of Christianity. To study this book is to walk in the footsteps, not only of the apostle Paul, but of such theological and pastoral giants as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Robert Haldane, Charles Hodge, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and many others.

But, in my opinion, it is not just this impressive array of prior witnesses that we find daunting. The real reason for our anxiety is the suspicion that a study of Romans will change us profoundly and unalterably. For

that is what it was meant to do, after all! And what it has already done! In the opening chapter, I quote F. Godet as saying that there has never been and probably never will be an important spiritual movement in the history of the church that cannot be connected as cause and effect with a deeper knowledge of the truths of this book. That is true. But it is not just church history that has been influenced by Romans. Individuals have been so affected by this great epistle that they have been moved to risk everything for Jesus Christ. If *they* have been, what is to keep this from becoming our own experience?

We all fear change, of course. It makes us anxious. But change is precisely what we need. If we are spiritually moribund, we need to be brought from a state of spiritual death into a state of spiritual life through the gospel. If we are lethargic in our discipleship, we need to be awakened to the glories of a renewed life in Christ. If we are indifferent to the spiritual state of others, we need to be alerted to their peril apart from Christ and be moved to take the gospel to them.

I confess that I have been instructed, moved, and even deeply stirred, by my own studies. Above all, I have been convicted of how shallow I have been in my understanding of the gospel; indeed, how shallow most of our evangelical Christianity, particularly in America, has been. I used to say that American Christianity at best has mastered Romans 1 through 4, and has not even begun to understand Romans 5 through 8, not to mention the remainder of the letter. But today I am not sure we have even mastered the first four chapters. How often do we hear the depravity of the race discussed, as Paul discusses it in Romans 1? How often do we hear that from God's perspective, man is utterly depraved, as Paul says in Romans 3? How often do we hear messages on propitiation, redemption, justification, or faith, the central doctrines of the great latter half of Romans 3? Or the proof of these truths from the Old Testament, which is the burden of Romans 4?

Instead, we cling to man-centered, need-oriented teaching. And our churches show it! They are successful in worldly terms—big buildings, big budgets, big everything—but they suffer from a poverty of soul.

All this means, in my judgment at least, that it is time to get back to the basic, life-transforming doctrines of Christianity—which is to say that it is time to rediscover Romans. I invite you to discover it again with me, through this volume and those to follow. The congregation of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where I have served as pastor for more than twenty years, has already been doing this, since these are the messages I preached to the morning congregation for nearly two years between September 1986 and June 1988. Listeners of The Bible Study Hour will know that these studies were also aired over the radio from 1987 to 1989. As usual in the preface to my books, I wish to thank the officers and members of Tenth Presbyterian Church for permitting me to invest so much of my time in study and in the preparation of these sermons.

Who knows what God will do for us as we again discover and attempt to live out the great truths of the gospel! May he give us a Great Awakening. We certainly need it. May he even give us a new Reformation.

An Introduction to Romans

Romans 1:1-7

With those powerful opening words, written nearly two thousand years ago in the bustling commercial city of Corinth, Greece, a Jewish Christian began a letter to believers whom he had never seen in the far-off city of Rome. What a letter it was! In any other circumstances and by any other hand, the letter might have been a mere incidental piece of correspondence. But the author of this letter was the apostle Paul, and by his hand and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit this bit of ancient writing became for Christians the most influential document ever penned.

Here follow two examples. In the fourth century a distinguished philosopher and teacher named Augustine was under conviction concerning the truthfulness of Christianity. He was a brilliant and attractive man; but he had also lived an immoral life, as many of the

pagan intellectuals of his day did, and his past practice of immorality held him in a vise-like grip. He tells about it in the eighth book of his *Confessions*, relating how, although he was convinced of the truthfulness of Christianity, he nevertheless kept putting off a true repudiation of sin and a commitment to Jesus Christ.

One day, while in the garden of a friend's estate near Milan, Italy, Augustine heard a child singing the words *tole lege, tole lege* ("take and read"). He had never heard a song with words like that before, so he received it as a message from God. Obeying the message, he rushed to where a copy of the Bible was lying, opened it at random, and began to read the words that first met his astonished gaze. They were from Romans, the thirteenth chapter: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Rom. 13:13-14). This was exactly what was needed by Saint Augustine, as he was later called. The words were the means of his conversion. Afterward he wrote, "Instantly, as the sentence ended—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart —all the gloom of doubt was vanished away." Augustine became the greatest figure in the early Christian church between the apostle Paul and Martin Luther.

The second example of the Romans epistle's influence is the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. He was no profligate, as Augustine was. Quite the contrary. Luther was a pious, earnest monk— an apparent Christian. But Luther had no peace of soul. He wanted to please God, to be accepted by him. But the harder he worked, the more elusive the salvation of his soul seemed to be. Instead of growing closer to God, he found himself moving away from him. Instead of coming to love God, which Luther knew he should do, he found himself hating God for requiring an apparently impossible standard of righteousness of human beings. In desperation Luther turned to a study of Paul's letter to the Romans and there, as early as the seventeenth verse of chapter 1, he found the solution: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is

revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" As God opened the meaning of this verse to him, Luther realized that the righteousness he needed was not his own righteousness but a righteousness of God, freely given to all who would receive it. Furthermore, this was to be received, not through any works of his own but by faith only (*sola fide*). Faith meant taking God at his word, believing him. Luther did this, and as he did he felt himself to be reborn and to have entered Paradise.

Here is how he put it: "I had no love for that holy and just God who punishes sinners. I was filled with secret anger against him. I hated him, because, not content with frightening by the law and the miseries of life us wretched sinners, already ruined by original sin, he still further increased our tortures by the gospel.... But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood the words—when I learned how the justification of the sinner proceeds from the free mercy of our Lord through faith... then I felt born again like a new man.... In very truth, this language of Saint Paul was to me the true gate of Paradise."

Luther called Romans "the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel"; he believed that "every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, [and] occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of his soul."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English poet, called Romans "the profoundest book in existence."

The great Swiss commentator F. Godet wrote that in all probability "every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book."

Foundational Christianity

But is that really true? We live in a skeptical age, and it is not unreasonable to think that a sizable percentage of people hearing or reading a statement like that in our day will challenge it. We know that Romans 13:13-14 was used by God to change the life of Saint Augustine and that Augustine altered history by his impact upon the

church of the Middle Ages. We know that God used Martin Luther to launch the Reformation. But that was long ago. Augustine lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. Luther labored in the fifteen hundreds. Times have changed since then. Is there any reason to expect a corresponding impact from a study of this ancient letter today?

There is every reason to expect it, and the chief reason is that *Christianity has been the most powerful, transforming force in human history—and the book of Romans is the most basic, most comprehensive statement of true Christianity.*

Not everyone has agreed with this assessment, of course. There have been times when one teacher or another has been enamored with the so-called simple teachings of Jesus and has rejected the writings of Paul as too doctrinaire, too technical, or too harsh. All we really need is to tell people that God loves them, these instructors have said. Others have maintained that it is not what we believe that matters so much as what we do. From that perspective it is the social teachings of Christianity that are its heart; doctrines divide, whereas ethics ennoble our lives and unite us. These views all have a seed of wisdom, but they overlook the major issue. The fundamental human problem is not to understand what proper behavior is; generally we know that quite well. The problem is that we do not do what we know we should do. Indeed, we even seem incapable of doing it. This is what Augustine discovered when he tried to reform his life apart from the power of Christ. Again, the problem is not that we need to know that God loves us, though we often doubt that he does. Our hang-up is that we do not love God, as Luther, the pious monk, discovered. We are at war with God. In effect, we hate him; at the very least we do not want him to rule over our lives and resent any meaningful attempts he makes to do so.

Romans shows how God deals with this problem. And because it tells how God deals with this basic dilemma of human life, it necessarily also unveils the true solution to nearly everything else. When we repent of our sin and thus truly come to love God, we discover the secret to an upright and satisfying life, and we become a power for good rather than

a disruptive, downward force or merely an indifferent presence in society.

Overview of the Epistle

In the following chapters of this and subsequent volumes, I intend to examine this great ancient document in detail. But because this is an introductory study, it is well at the outset to fix an overview of the entire letter in our minds. Romans has the following parts:

1. *A preliminary personal word and introduction (1:1-15).* Romans is a doctrinal treatise placed between the opening and closing sections of a typical ancient letter. But, unlike most ancient writers, Paul uses the opening section to introduce the theme that will occupy him at length later on. It is "the gospel of God." Gospel means "good news." So Paul is announcing news that is not only good but superlatively good, since it comes from the One who is the Great Good of all.

2. *A brief statement of the theme (1:16-17).* In his introduction Paul shows that the gospel centers in the person of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. But what is this Good News specifically? Paul's short statement shows that it concerns the revelation of God's righteousness to us apart from human works. These were the verses that transformed the life of Martin Luther, for they showed that the answer to life comes not by striving to do good works to please God, but by resting in the finished work of God for us in Jesus Christ.

3. *An analysis of the depravity of human beings and an explanation of the work of Christ as the provision for that need (1:18-4:25).* This is the first major section of the letter, and it contains the most penetrating and perceptive analysis of human nature in its relationship to God ever written. The first thing Paul shows is that, although people have knowledge of the existence of God through nature, all act as if the true God does not exist. Or, if they acknowledge him verbally, they nevertheless distort their

> understanding so that they actually worship the creation rather than the Creator. This willful ignorance has not been overlooked by God, since he has punished it by abandoning people to the natural outworking of their sins. This spiritual outworking of sin drags the race downward and enslaves us in invisible chains.

All are involved in this tragedy. The pagan is involved, for the moral disintegration of his life shows him to be held in sin's power. The "moral" individual is also involved, for although he approves of higher behavioral standards, he inevitably fails to live up to those standards. His guilt is even greater than the pagan's. Last of all, Paul unveils the need of the pious, or "religious," individual. The problem with the merely religious person is that the practice of religion alone cannot change the heart.

But here is where the gospel enters in. Although all have been enmeshed in sin's tentacles—so that Paul can remind us, quoting from the Old Testament, that "'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one'" (Rom. 3:1012)—God has taken the initiative to save us. Through the work of Christ he has provided the righteousness we lack, and he has done this not only for Jews, who might have expected it, but for Gentiles, too. This is why the late Welsh preacher, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones of London, England, calls Romans 3:21-31, in which this doctrine is stated, "one of the greatest and noblest statements in the whole realm of scripture."

In Romans 4, which is also part of this section, Paul shows that the gospel he has explained in chapter 3 has *always* been God's way of saving lost sinners. It is true that God accomplished salvation through the work of Jesus Christ, who from the perspective of Paul had lived in the notfar-distant past. But the timing is unimportant, says the apostle. Those who lived before Christ were saved by looking forward to his coming, by faith, just as we who have come afterward are also saved by

faith as we look back. Paul proves this by Old Testament statements concerning the patriarch Abraham and King David.

4. *A review of the great scope of salvation (5:1-8:39).* A number of commentators have supposed that in this second major section of his letter, Paul moves from the doctrine of justification by faith to the doctrine of sanctification. But Lloyd-Jones is surely right when he suggests that Paul is actually "showing... the certainty, fullness and finality" of what God has done. Sanctification is indeed included in this section. But the author is actually covering the full scope of what God's work in Christ means for the believer. It gives him a new status before God and new privileges
(5:1-11). It joins him to the living Lord Jesus Christ from whom flows a new life of
righteousness (5:12-6:23). It releases him from the anguish of trying to attain to moral rectitude by law (7:1-25). It provides victory over sin by the power of the Holy Spirit (8:1-17). It ends in glorification, for the reason that nothing in heaven or earth can ever separate us from the inexpressible love and power of God in Jesus Christ (8:18-39).

5. *A Christian view of history (9:1-11:36).* Those who see a change of subject between chapters 4 and 5 inevitably see an even wider chasm between chapters 8 and 9. Indeed, it is a worse misunderstanding than this! Even many of the best commentators speak of Romans 9-11 as a parenthesis in which, so they suppose, Paul departs from his theme entirely in order to deal with God's different and separate plan for the Jewish people. A correct view, I believe, is that chapters 9 through 11 are a continuation of everything said thus far, particularly Paul's treatment of the believer's eternal security in Christ with which chapter 8 ends. Paul has argued that Jews and Gentiles are alike trapped by sin. He has shown that salvation is by Christ and that this salvation is eternal, being beyond any possibility of repudiation by God. But, some might ask, what of God's ancient chosen people? Most Jews seem to have rejected Christ. If that is so, then one of two things must follow. Either (1) certain people can be saved without Christ (the

Jews), which Paul has already said to be impossible; or (2) salvation is not secure, since God has already apparently broken his covenant with the Jews and so should not be trusted.

Paul's answer is that God has not broken faith with Israel. On the contrary, he is doing today as he has always done. God is utterly consistent. There had never been a time in history in which every Jew was saved, just *because* that individual was a Jew. And no one is saved today merely by being what he or she is naturally: a churchgoer, a moral person, a philanthropist, an American (or any other nationality), or even a child of Christian parents. Salvation is by grace through faith, which means that it flows from God's choice and activity. It is God's salvation, after all, not
man's. And God will work it out—he *is* working it out—until the fullness of his purpose regarding the salvation of a people for himself is complete.

This is the meaning of history. Its explanation is not found in the rise and fall of empires or in individual accomplishments. It is seen in God's choice of a people for himself and in his work of perfecting and eventually glorifying them. This thought is so wonderful to Paul that he ends this section of his letter with the tremendous doxology of Romans 11:33-36:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

6. *The outworking of Christianity in individual and national life (12:1-15:13).* Paul was no armchair theologian, no ivory-tower divine. His letters always contain and usually end with practical and personal considerations. It is the same here. Having explained the gospel of God's unmerited salvation in Christ and having answered all reasonable objections to it, Paul concludes

by showing how the work of God inevitably spills over into the details of individual and national life. His point is not only that Christianity will make a difference in life—though it will—but that it is the only thing that will ever actually make any true alteration in the world.

7. *A conclusion embracing Paul's future plans and final greetings (15:14-16:27).* Having begun in letter format, the apostle now ends the epistle in the same way. In this section he tells of his hopes for the church at Rome, unveils more of his plans to visit them after having first made a trip to Jerusalem with an offering for the Jewish saints, and sends greetings to Rome from the church at Corinth. Greetings from his fellow workers and a benediction end the letter.

Paul's Regular Teaching

In the nineteenth chapter of Acts, Luke the historian says that during Paul's missionary journeys, the apostle spent two years in Ephesus teaching "the word of the Lord" to all who lived in Asia (v. 10). A marginal note in one ancient manuscript suggests that he did this for five hours each day. Counting six days to each week and fifty-two weeks to each year, that makes 3,120 hours of apostolic instruction, considerably more than most Bachelor or Master of Theology degree programs. What do you suppose Paul taught the residents of Asia during these two long years of instruction? I suggest that he taught them essentially what he has given us in outline form in Romans: the ruin of the human race in sin and the provision of a perfect and eternal remedy for that ruin through the work of Jesus Christ.

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that this is what the apostle Paul would teach if he were to work among us for the same length of time today.

Is Romans relevant today? It is—as long as people of every race, culture and nationality are estranged from God because of sin.

Is Christianity relevant? It is—as long as it can redeem us for God, produce holiness in those who are trapped by sin, explain the meaning of life, and change history. Robert Haldane, the great nineteenth-century Scottish expositor of this letter, said as he drew near his initial summation of the epistle's teaching, "Paul, writing without any of the aids of human wisdom, draws his precepts from the fountain of heavenly truth, and inculcates on the disciples of Jesus a code of duties, which, if habitually practiced by mankind, would change the world from what it is—a scene of strife, jealousy and division—and make it what it was before the entrance of sin, a paradise fit for the Lord to visit and for man to dwell in."

Part One.

Opening Statements

Chapter 1.
A Man in Christ

Romans 1:1

Lord Lyttleton and Gilbert West were two nineteenth-century English barristers. They were unbelievers who one day took it upon themselves to disprove Christianity. As they discussed their project they decided that there were two main bulwarks of the Christian religion: the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the conversion and apostleship of Paul. West undertook to write against the resurrection of Jesus, while Lyttleton's task was to disprove the factuality of Paul's conversion.

Each was somewhat rusty in his knowledge of the facts, as unbelievers often are. So one lawyer said to the other, "If we are to be honest in this matter, we should at least investigate the evidence." They agreed to do this. While they were preparing their books they had a number of conferences, and in one of them West told Lyttleton that there was something on his mind that he felt he should share. He said that as he had been studying the evidence for Jesus' resurrection he had come to feel that there was something to it, since it was very well attested. Lyttleton replied that he was glad that West had spoken as he had, because on his part he had come to feel that there was some truth in the stories of Paul's Damascus Road conversion. Later, after they had finished their books and the two met again, Lyttleton said to his friend, "Gilbert, as I have been studying the evidence and weighing it by the recognized laws of legal evidence, I have become satisfied that Saul of Tarsus was converted as the New Testament says he was and that Christianity is true; I have written my book from that perspective." West replied that in a similar way he had become convinced of the truth of Jesus' resurrection, had come to believe in Jesus, and had written his book in defense of Christianity. Today their books are found in many good libraries.

Few Christians are surprised by this story, but it has at least one unusual element. Since it is clear that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is foundational to Christianity, it is easy to understand why a nonbeliever like West would want to write a book refuting the resurrection. But the conversion and apostleship of Saint Paul might initially seem to be a much less important matter.

Yet here, as in many other places, first glances are misleading. Paul was not "the founder of Christianity," as some have called him. Jesus alone deserves that title. Yet Paul is so important as the first and greatest of the church's missionaries and as the articulator and systematizer of its theology that discrediting his claim to have been called and taught by Christ would seriously undermine Christianity itself. If Paul was not converted as a result of seeing the risen Lord while on the road to Damascus, as he claimed, and if he did not receive his gospel by a direct revelation from Jesus Christ, then Paul was a charlatan, his writings are not true, and Christianity is bereft of its single most important teacher after Christ.

"Paul"—The Man from Tarsus

Here is the man who meets us at the very beginning of our study, in fact at the very first word. In the Greek text, as well as in nearly all the English versions, the first word of this most important New Testament book is "Paul." It is a miracle that the word is even there. Paul is indeed the writer of this book. But we should remember that it was written to a largely Gentile church and that in his early days Paul was a fanatical Jew who would have little or no concern for any Gentile community, least of all a community that claimed as its Lord a man who had been crucified for blasphemy against the God of Israel only a few years before.

Who was Paul? In an appeal to the Roman commander of the Jerusalem garrison, recorded in Acts, Paul identified himself as a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia, which he modestly called "no ordinary city" (Acts 21:39). Tarsus was a Greek city, the seat of a well-known university. Therefore, since Paul was apparently from a well-to-do family, we must assume

that he received an outstanding Greek or pagan education in Tarsus. He shows some evidence of this by occasionally quoting from the pagan poets.

Important as Paul's Greek education may have been, however, there is no doubt that his education in Judaism was the chief factor in his academic and intellectual development. Paul trained under the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem where, as he claimed, he acquired a thorough knowledge of Jewish law and traditions (Acts 22:3). The son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6), he became a Pharisee himself and was so zealous for the Pharisaic ideals of righteousness that he undertook a radical persecution of the early church, which he believed opposed those ideals (Acts 22:4-5; Phil. 3:6). Paul thus had the benefits of the best possible secular and religious educations, which led Charles Hodge to insist in his Romans commentary that "Paul, the most extensively useful of all the apostles, was... a thoroughly educated man."

That is worth highlighting. From time to time Christians become skeptical of secular education or even of natural gifts or talents, supposing that these must be opposed to anything done by God's Spirit, but it is unfortunate when Christians think this way. It is possible to clarify the matter by asking three questions. First, what man did God most use in the period of history covered by the Old Testament? The answer obviously is "Moses." Second, what kind of education did Moses have? The answer is "a secular education." He had the best secular education of his day, being instructed "in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," as Stephen observed (Acts 7:22). Third question: What man, aside from Jesus Christ, did God most use in the period of history covered by the New Testament? The answer, again quite obvious, is "Paul," a man who also had the best possible education of his time, first in Tarsus from pagan teachers, whoever they may have been, and then in Jerusalem from Gamaliel, a Jewish teacher and nonbeliever. The conclusion is that there is nothing wrong with either education, whether Christian or secular, or with natural gifts. On the contrary, one's talents

are God-given, and education is a very great privilege that can enhance them. If we have both, we can thank God for giving them to us.

Still, education in itself is neutral. It can be used for good or for evil. What matters is whether it is given over to God to be used by him as he wills. In his early years Paul used his education and zeal to oppose Christianity. It was only after he had his dramatic encounter with Christ that he was able to use these important tools rightly.

A Servant of Christ Jesus

This leads to the next set of words in Romans: "a servant of Christ Jesus." I have pointed out that Paul was a thoroughly educated man. But important as that is, it is necessary to add that he was also a thoroughly converted man. Paul had met Jesus Christ, and from that moment he was never his own man. He was a servant of the Lord.

In the earlier years of this century the late J. Gresham Machen, at that time Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote a classic study of the apostle Paul tided *The Origin of Paul's Religion.* It was a reply to nineteenth-century attacks on Christianity by men who, like the early Lord Lyttleton, recognized the importance of Paul for the formation of Christian thought and the establishing of Christianity but who, because they rejected a supernatural Jesus, found themselves pressed to account for the nature of the apostle's beliefs. In this book Machen destroyed the liberal views with characteristic thoroughness. On the positive side, he showed that the traditions concerning Paul's contact with the other apostles are sound and that the teachings of Paul were identical with theirs as well as with the teachings of the Lord. He also showed that Paul was convinced of the factualness of the resurrection. On the negative side, Machen showed that Paul could not have derived his beliefs from his Judaistic background or from paganism. "The religion of Paul was rooted in an event, and... the event was the redemptive work of Christ in his death and resurrection."

From a scholarly point of view, Machen might have allowed the book to rest there. But the real value of *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, in my judgment, is that this distinguished scholar then carried the argument one step further, showing not only that Paul was convinced of the truth of Christianity, including the great doctrine of the resurrection, but that he had been conquered and captivated by the living Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was in love with Jesus Christ, and it was his love for Christ that alone explains the nature and rigor of his life's work.

Machen wrote, "Paulinism is to be accounted for [by] the love of Paul for his Savior.... The religion of Paul was not founded upon a complex of ideas derived from Judaism or from paganism. It was founded upon the historical Jesus. But the historical Jesus upon whom it was founded was not the Jesus of modern reconstruction, but the Jesus of the whole New Testament and of Christian faith; not a teacher who survived only in the memory of his disciples, but the Savior who after his redeeming work was done still lived and could still be loved."

The conclusion of Machen's book, which I have quoted above, is the point of this first important phrase in Romans: "A servant of Christ Jesus." Paul was a super achiever, after all, so he could have introduced himself by a long list of accomplishments. He could have cited his ancestral tree, his degrees, his success in founding churches—even his writings, since Romans does not seem to have been the first of his letters. But Paul does not do this. Why? It is not because he was embarrassed about these things; he mentions them elsewhere in their proper place. It is certainly not because he did not value them. Paul overlooks these achievements because what he is most concerned about simply overshadows them. Above all else, Paul saw himself as a servant of the Lord.

Paul's letters are always filled with Jesus, no matter what he is writing about. Some letters, like Romans, are theological in nature. Others, like 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, deal with problems in the churches. Some are personal; some are incidental in nature. Whatever his topic or

specific purpose, Paul is always thinking about and relating his message to Jesus.

In the first seven verses of Romans, the first half of Paul's opening remarks, Jesus is mentioned by name, pronoun, title, or a descriptive phrase eight times: "Christ Jesus" (v. 1), "his Son," "a descendant of David" (v. 3), "the Son of God," "Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 4), "him" (v. 5), "Jesus Christ" (v. 6), and "the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 7).

This provides a very good way of testing our Christianity. Many of us, at least those who take time to read a study of Romans or certain other Bible commentaries, are convinced of the truthfulness of Christianity. Perhaps we can even articulate the doctrines of the faith, as Paul does. We can systematize theology. Ah, but do we love Jesus? Are our thoughts constantly occupied with him? Is he at the forefront? Is he the center? Is he the beginning and the end? When we talk to one another, do we speak often of him? Are we content to let the honors of the world pass by, so long as we can be known as Christ's servants? This gets very close to what is chiefly wrong with our contemporary Christianity. Our religion is one of personalities, plans, and programs, of buildings, books, and bargains. Because it is not the faith of those who love Jesus, it is shallow and selfish, constantly shifting in the ebbs and flows of cultural standards. As we grow in grace we will think less of these things and more of him who "loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Paul's description of himself as Christ's servant accomplishes a number of other things that are also worth noting:

1. *Paul's description of himself as a servant of Christ puts him in the same category as those to whom he is writing.* In other words, it identifies Paul first and foremost as a Christian. One of the great theological terms of Christianity, which Paul will use in his important explanation of the gospel in chapter 3, is "redemption." In his day it meant to buy in the marketplace, particularly to buy a slave. Slavery to Christ is a special kind of slavery, of course. It is a slavery in which we actually become free. Nevertheless, to

become a servant or slave of Christ Jesus is a proper description of what it means to be a Christian. That is why Paul could write to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). When Paul identifies himself as "a servant of Christ Jesus," he is saying, among other things, "I am like you. Like you, I, too, have been purchased by Christ and am his follower."

2. *Paul's description of himself as a servant of Christ Jesus emphasizes that his chief function as a disciple of Christ is service.* This is worth noting, because it is a missing element in many of our fellowships.

Not long ago I was talking with a distinguished Christian whom God has used to found a thriving independent church in Texas. The church is now about twenty-five years old, and, according to my friend, the first fifteen years of its existence were spent in trying to convince everyone that it was the only true church in its city (or at least the only good one), and that the cause of Christ would be best served if those belonging to the other churches would simply leave their fellowships and join it. In those fifteen years the church membership grew from perhaps sixty to a hundred and fifty persons. About that time it dawned on the leaders that the way they had marked out was not self-evidently blessed by God, so they decided to take another tack. Instead of urging people to join them and thus contribute to their ministry, the leaders decided to become a church of servants. This meant giving themselves to whatever good work was being done, wherever it was done, and not being fretful if others got credit or even left the home church to further it. With this attitude the church began to grow, and in the last ten years it has swelled to more than two thousand members.

We should learn from this—and from the apostle Paul, who assumed and modeled a servant role. To be more basic, we should learn from Jesus, who said on one occasion, "... whoever wants to become great

among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26-28).

3. *Paul's description of himself as a servant of Christ reminds his readers that he is nevertheless Christ's servant—a servant of Christ first and a servant of man second—and that he is uniting to them in this capacity.* This anticipates the next of Paul's phrases.

Called to Be an Apostle

What is an apostle? "Apostle" is one of the least appreciated and even most misunderstood words in the Christian vocabulary. For some it means little more than "disciple." This is unfortunate, because a misunderstanding of this word involves a misunderstanding of much about Christianity.

The best passage for understanding the meaning of the term *apostle* is Acts 1:15-26, in which the eleven apostles elected a twelfth to complete their ranks after the treachery and death of Judas. As Peter explained, it was necessary for the replacement to have known the risen Lord and to have been chosen by him for this office. The disciples nominated two who met the first qualification: Joseph Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they drew lots to see whom Jesus himself would select. The choice fell on Matthias. This episode teaches that an apostle was to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that he was also necessarily chosen and equipped by Jesus for this function.

Yet there is more to it even than this. We know that at the very end of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts, the Lord gives Christians a command we call the Great Commission. It means that we are all to be witnesses to Christ. If this is so, why is the apostolic office a special one? The answer comes from observing the way these chosen representatives of the Lord regarded their office. It is not only that they saw themselves as witnesses. The apostles also knew that they were to witness in an extraordinary, supernatural sense. Because they were apostles, God spoke authoritatively through them, so that what they said

as apostles carried the force of divine teaching or Scripture. We see this clearly in Galatians, in which Paul defends his apostleship. At the beginning he stresses the divine origin of his calling, writing, "Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead" (Gal. 1:1). After that he links the nature and authority of the gospel to this office: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, not was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (vv. 1112).

By calling himself an apostle in Romans, Paul reminds his readers that he is writing as no mere ordinary man but rather as one who has been given a message that should be received by them as the very words of God.

This also has a bearing on ourselves, for it tells us how we are to receive this book and benefit from it. We can study it as a merely human book, of course. That cannot be bad, since Romans is a good piece of writing, one well worth studying, even on limited terms. But if we would profit by it greatly, we must receive it as what it truly is—a message from God to our hearts and minds—and we must obey its teachings, just as we would be obliged to obey God if he should speak to us directly.

Set Apart for the Gospel of God

The third phrase Paul uses to introduce himself to the believers in Rome is "set apart for the gospel of God." This takes us back to the opening overview of Paul's life. In the days before his meeting with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul was a Pharisee, and the meaning of that word is "separation" or "a separated one." This is the word Paul now uses of his commitment to the gospel. Before he met Christ, Paul was set apart to the Pharisaic traditions. Indeed, he regarded himself as one sublimely set apart. Pharisees crossed the street rather than pass close to some unworthy sinner or vile publican. They held to dietary restraints and sacramental cleansings. The list of things a Pharisee would *not* do was tremendous. But, when Paul met Christ, a lifeshattering change occurred in him. Before, he was separated *from* all manner of things,

and as a result he was self-righteous, narrow, cruel, and obsessive. Afterward, he was separated *unto* something, unto the gospel. That separation was positive—expansive and joyful, yet humbling. Paul never got over that divinely produced transformation.

Nor should you. Do you know what it is to be released from a negative legalism into the liberation of a positive Christianity? I am sure that in his new calling there were many things that Paul did not do. Certainly he did not make provision for fulfilling fleshly sins. He did not lie or cheat or steal or commit adultery. But Paul never thought of the rejection of these sins as privation, because he had his heart set on something more, and that was so grand a commitment that he always counted his calling to be the greatest of all privileges.

Chapter 2.
God's Grand Old Gospel

Romans 1:1-2

The most important word in the introduction to Paul's letter to the Romans is "gospel." There it occurs six times (vv. 1, 2, 9, 15, 16, 17), and it is important because it is the theme of the epistle. Romans was written to make this great gospel of God more widely known.

We read the word for the first time in verse 1, just nine words into the Greek text. Paul identifies it as "the gospel of God," to which he has been called and set apart. In verse 2 he elaborates a bit, beginning to explain exactly what this gospel is. It is a gospel "promised beforehand through [God's] prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son." That is, it concerns the Lord Jesus
Christ. In verse 9 Paul uses a phrase that firms up that definition, calling it "the gospel of his Son" and adding that he desires to preach it with his whole heart. In verses 15 through 17 he speaks again of his eagerness to preach the gospel: "That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for

the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...."

The Great Good News

Most of us know that the word *gospel* (*euangelion*, Greek) means "good news." But I am sure that D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is correct when he suggests in his commentary that most of us stop at the definition and do not actually appreciate how good the good news truly is.

To appreciate the goodness of the gospel we should begin with the fact that aside from Christianity the religions of the world are not at all good news. On the contrary, they are very bad news, a burden. We see this merely by looking into the hard, grim faces of the leaders of the world's other religions—the priests, monks, mullahs, gurus, and holy men who are found in every land and among all races. These are not happy people! And the religions they teach are not happy religions for those who follow them. The reason is not hard to discover. Apart from Christianity all the religions of the world are self-help or "works" religions. That is, they tell you how to find God (or peace, happiness, whatever) by human efforts. If it were possible to do this, religion in general might be good news. But the task is *not* possible. God is too holy, too removed from us because of his holiness and our sin, for us to reach him. Sin has so great a hold on us that it keeps us from the happiness we long for. A religion based on what you or I can do is comfortless because its requirements become burdens that can never be lifted.

This is what Paul himself had found. He had followed a religion of strictly defined good works and high moral standards. But it had not given him peace or even a true sense of achievement. He says later in this epistle that although he had learned what he should do, he found that he could not do it and so was a very "wretched man" (Rom. 7:24).

In our day many people have recognized this and have therefore sought happiness in the religion of "no religion." They have become practical atheists, regarding religion as a tool of some people to control others

and therefore something that an enlightened society should throw away. At first this "no religion" seems like good news. But the goodness evaporates as soon as we stop to think about it. If there is no God and if we are therefore free to do as we please without any thought of accountability to a divine authority or punishment by him, we seem to be liberated to joyous independence. But if there is no accountability, because there is nobody to be accountable to, what we do with this great "freedom" becomes meaningless. Moreover, if what we do is meaningless, *we* must be meaningless, too. We are accidental bubbles upon the great cosmic deep, destined only to burst and be forgotten.

"No religion" leads nowhere. It may seem to offer the great good news of human progress, but it actually leaves us with despair over the futility of human existence.

This is where Christianity comes in and proclaims what is really good news. The gospel is good for two reasons. First, it tells us that God is actually there—that he is not merely the figment of human imagination but really exists, that he has made us for fellowship with himself and does hold us accountable for what we do. This gives meaning to life. Second, it tells us that God loves us and has reached out to save us through the work of Jesus Christ. We could not reach God, because our sins separated us from him. But God removed our sins through Christ and so bridged the gap over these very troubled waters. Before, we were groaning after God but could not find him. Now we sing praises to the One who has found us.

Let me make this last point explicitly. Have you ever considered how characteristic it is of Christianity that such large portions of our worship consist of singing praises to God? There is singing in other religions, of course; but it is usually mere chanting, which is itself a religious exercise designed to make the worshiper more "holy" or bring him closer to the deity. Christians do not sing as a good work or as a spiritual discipline. We do not sing to find God. We sing because he has found us and we are happy about it. The very first hymn in many hymnbooks says:

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with fear, his praise forthtell,
Come ye before him and rejoice.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asks, "Has the gospel come to us like that? Can we say honestly at this moment that this is the greatest and best good news that we have ever heard?" If we cannot say that, it may be because we are not really born again, regardless of our profession. Or it may be that we do not actually appreciate the gospel, because we are not walking very close to God.

A "Promised" Gospel

The second thing Paul says about this gospel, this good news, is that it was "promised beforehand" through God's prophets. This is an important point because, new as the Christian gospel seemed when it first burst upon our sin-darkened world, the gospel of the salvation of men by God through the work of Jesus Christ was nevertheless no novelty. On the contrary, it was the goal to which all prior revelations of God during the Old Testament period led. We find this affirmed in every surviving example of the apostolic preaching.

1. *The preaching of Paul.* The apostle Paul seems never to have tired of showing this connection when he spoke about the gospel. In the thirteenth chapter of Acts, which gives us the first recorded example of Paul's preaching, we find Paul reviewing Israel's history to show (just as he does in Romans 1) that God sent Jesus as a descendant of King David, according to his promise, and that everything that happened to Jesus during the days of his earthly ministry fulfilled the Holy Scriptures. He was condemned and crucified as the prophets had said he would be. Afterward, he was raised from the dead according to these same prophecies. In the latter half of this sermon Paul quotes Psalm 2:7 to prove Christ's deity: "'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'" (Acts 13:33), and Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10 to confirm that the resurrection was prophesied: "'I will give you the holy and sure

> blessings promised to David.' So it is stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your Holy One see decay'" (vv. 34-35).

At the end of his sermon in Acts 13, Paul warns of the dangers of unbelief, citing Habakkuk 1:5 ("I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe," v. 41), and announcing that even his proclamation of the gospel to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles had been prophesied in Isaiah 49:6 ("I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth," v. 47).

We find this same reference to Old Testament teachings elsewhere. When we are told of Paul's first preaching at Thessalonica, we read, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3). Paul also uses this approach in Romans 4, proving the gospel he has explained in Romans 3 on the basis of Old Testament texts about Abraham and King David.

2. *The preaching of Philip.* When we go back a few chapters in Acts and thus to a slightly earlier period in the history of the church, we come to the ministry of the deacon Philip. God used Philip to preach the gospel to an Ethiopian official, and the way he did it was by announcing the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7-8, which the Ethiopian was reading aloud but did not understand:

> *"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb*
> *before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*
> *In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*
> *Who can speak of his descendants?*
> *For his life was taken from the earth."*
>
> *Acts 8:32-33*

The story relates that "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35).

3. *The preaching of Peter.* In the early chapters of Acts we have two examples of Peter's early preaching. The first was at Pentecost, when Peter gave a sermon that was roughly half quotations from the Old Testament; these were explained in the other half of the message. In this sermon

Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32 (his chief text, prophesying Pentecost itself), Psalm 16:8-11 (which Paul later quoted in part in his sermon recorded in Acts 13), and Psalm 110:1 (the Old Testament verse most cited in the New). In Peter's sermon (Acts 2:14-36) there are eleven verses of Old Testament quotation and twelve verses of introduction, explanation, and application.

It is recorded in Acts 4:8-12 that Peter also preached on Psalm 118:22, showing that the Old Testament prophesied Jesus' rejection by Israel and his ultimate glorification by God. "He is," said Peter, "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone" (v. 11). This was a favorite text for Peter. He used it again in his first letter, in conjunction with Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16.

4. *The preaching of Jesus Christ.* Where did the apostles get this important Old Testament approach to the gospel, particularly since none of their contemporaries seem to have read the Old Testament books in this fashion? There is only one answer. They got it from the Lord Jesus Christ, their master, who saw his life as a fulfillment of Scripture and also taught his disciples to view it in that way. We remember that after the resurrection, when Jesus was walking to Emmaus with two of his followers, he chided them on their slowness to believe what the Old Testament writers had spoken: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" The text continues: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).

Let me emphasize this point. The gospel is good news, of course. But not only that; it is the good news God has been announcing from the very beginning of his dealings with the human race, up to and including the end of the Old Testament—from Genesis 3:15 (the first announcement of the gospel) to Malachi 4:5 (which speaks of the coming of Elijah as Christ's forerunner).

This is the key to understanding the entire Old Testament. It is the key to understanding the New Testament. It is the key to understanding all history—God's saving men and women through the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as he announced "beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures."

"The Holy Scriptures"

Moreover, it is in the Holy Scriptures that this announcement has been made. This phrase is of tremendous importance because it identifies the place at which the announcement of God's great good news may be found and highlights its very essence.

First, the announcement of God's good news is in *writing*, the writings of the prophets. This means that we are not to look elsewhere for it, as if God had chosen to reveal this news by mystical visions, through inward intimations, or in some other nonbiblical or nonobjective way. We have documents to study and words to ponder and understand. Second, the books of the Bible are special, *holy* writings, which means they are not mere human compositions but are the very words of God. They are God's revelation to mankind. As Peter, himself one of the human instruments for God's giving of the New Testament, wrote: "... no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). We should be drawn to the Word in faithful study and meditation—if we really believe the Bible to be God's Holy Scriptures.

I think of how John Wesley expressed his yearning for the Word in that well-known introduction to his sermons:

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God, just hovering over the great gulf, till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity. I want to know one thing—the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end he came from heaven. He ha[s] written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* ("a man of one book"). Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone. Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book—for this end, to find the way to heaven.

I note, as John Murray does in his study of Romans, that the great Karl Barth, usually so perceptive in his exegetical comments, passes over the words *Holy Scripture* without notice in his commentary. Barth valued the gospel, but he did not fully appreciate the nature of the documents in which this gospel is disclosed. It is a flaw in his theology.

Do not let it be a flaw with you. Recognize, as Paul did, that God has spoken to us in the Bible, and therefore determine to study it carefully and obediently. You should do with it what Francis Bacon said we should do with even the greatest of human books: "taste," "chew," "swallow," and "digest" it, and read it "wholly, and with diligence and attention."

God's Gospel

The final point about the gospel made by Paul in these two verses of Romans is the one with which Paul actually starts, namely, that it is *God's* gospel. It is something God announced and accomplished and what *he* sent his apostles to proclaim. It is something God blesses and through which *he* saves men and women. The grammatical way of stating this is that the genitive ("of God") is a subjective, rather than an objective genitive. It means that God creates and announces the gospel rather than that he is the object of its proclamation.

Note how prominent this point is in these early verses of Romans. God the Father has "promised [the gospel] beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (v. 2). He has sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to accomplish the work thus promised, with the result that the gospel, then as now, is "regarding" him (v. 3). Finally, it is "through him and for his name's sake" that Paul and the other apostles, exercising a calling received by them from God, were in the process of proclaiming the gospel to men and women everywhere (v. 5).

If God is concerned about his gospel to this extent, will he not bless it fully wherever these great truths are proclaimed?

Let me tell you one story of such a blessing. In the year 1816 a Scotsman by the name of Robert
Haldane went to Switzerland. Haldane was a godly layman who, with his brother James Alexander, had been much used of the Lord in Scotland. In Geneva, on this particular occasion, he was sitting on a park bench in a garden in the open air and heard a group of young men talking. As he listened he realized two things. First, these were theological students. Second, they were ignorant of true Christianity. As a result of this encounter and after a few encouraging conversations, Haldane invited the students to his room and began to teach them the Book of Romans, going through it verse by verse, as we will be doing in these studies. God honored this work, and the Holy Spirit blessed it by the conversions of these young men. They were converted one by one, and in turn they were instrumental in a religious revival that not only affected Switzerland but spread to France and the Netherlands.

One of these students was Merle d'Aubigné, who became famous for his classic *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.* We know it in an abbreviated form as *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*. Another of these men was Louis Gaussen, the author of *Theopneustia,* a book on the inspiration of the Scriptures. The company of those converted through Haldane's exposition of Romans included: Frédéric Monod, the chief architect and founder of the Free

Churches in France; Bonifas, who became a great and distinguished theologian; and César Malan, another important religious leader. All were converted as a result of Haldane's exposition of the truths of the Romans epistle.

Why should it be any different today? If it were *our* gospel, we could expect nothing. But it is not our gospel. It is "the gospel of God," that grand old gospel that was "promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" and achieved for us by the Lord Jesus Christ through his substitutionary death and resurrection. We should proclaim it fearlessly and with zeal, as did Paul.

Chapter 3.
The Gospel of Jesus Christ

Romans 1:2-4

In the previous study I tried to show that Christianity, the religion being explained by the apostle Paul in Romans, is a unique religion, and I gave a number of reasons for saying that. In this chapter we come to the chief reason: Christianity is unique because it is founded upon a unique person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet it is more than this. Not only is Christianity unique because its founder is unique, it is unique because it is uniquely linked to him, in the sense that you simply cannot have Christianity without the Lord Jesus Christ! J. N.D. Anderson, director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies at the University of London, has noted that other religions are quite different:

In Confucianism and Buddhism it is the teaching and principles of Confucius and the Buddha which represent the essence of the religion, rather than the teacher who first enunciated them or the facts of his life and death. Even in Islam, the towering figure of Muhammad finds its paramount importance in the divine revelation which it believes was given to mankind through him. It is the *ipsissima verba* of the

Almighty, communicated to the prophet by the Archangel Gabriel and subsequently recorded in the Qur'ân, together with that further teaching provided by the inspired *sunna* or practice of the prophet, which constitute the essence of the faith; and a Muslim would point to the Book and the Traditions, rather than to Muhammad himself, as the media of revelation.

By contrast, Christianity *is* Jesus Christ. John R. W. Stott wrote: "The person and work of Christ are the rock upon which the Christian religion is built. If he is not who he said he was, and if he did not do what he said he had come to do, the foundation is undermined and the whole superstructure will collapse. Take Christ from Christianity, and you disembowel it; there is practically nothing left. Christ is the center of Christianity; all else is circumference."

Who Is Jesus Christ?

Obviously this causes us to ask who Jesus Christ is, and, as soon as we do, we find Paul's answer in the words "his Son"—Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God.

Today, largely as a result of the religious liberalism of the last century, the term "son of God" is understood in a nearly generic sense, usually meaning only "a human being." Liberal theology holds that we are all sons or daughters of God. But this is a rather new heresy and one that none of the New Testament writers would have understood. When they used the words "Son of God" they were not referring to any supposed divine characteristics of human beings or even of some special relationship that we are all supposed to have to God. They meant deity itself. They meant that he who was being called Son of God was uniquely divine; that is, he was and always had been God.

Take the great confession of the apostle Peter, recorded in Matthew 16. Jesus had asked the disciples who the people were saying he was. They gave answers that had been making the rounds: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets.

"But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered for the rest: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). This answer set Jesus apart from the category of those human figures the people were suggesting. It identified him as the divine Messiah. Moreover, Jesus accepted the designation, assuring Peter and the others that this insight had come not as the result of simple human observation but as a special revelation from God the Father. It was God who had given Peter this great discernment.

Jesus explicitly taught who he was: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He had also said, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58).

When Thomas fell down to worship Jesus after his resurrection, confessing him "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), Jesus accepted the designation. Then he gently chided Thomas, not for his worship but for his earlier unbelief.

This is the sense in which Paul begins to unfold the content of the Christian message. Already he has called it "the gospel of God," meaning that God is the source of this great plan of salvation. Now he adds that the gospel concerns "his [God's] Son." This means that Jesus is the unique Son of God and that the person and work of this divine Jesus are the gospel's substance. This is where we start. We do not countenance any modern nonsense about a "Christless Christianity." We begin with the eternal Son of God, and we confess that everything we believe and are as Christians centers in the person and work of that unique individual.

The God-Man

Jesus is not only unique in his divine nature, however. He is also unique in that he became man at a specific point in human history and now remains the God-man eternally. No one else is like that. No one can ever be.

This brings us to a remarkable section of Paul's introduction in which every word is so precisely chosen and of such significance that, even apart from Paul's claims to be writing as an apostle, we ought to think of Romans as more than a "merely human" composition. To begin with, there is an obvious contrast between the two natures of the historical, earthly Jesus. The first is his human nature. In the Greek text the word is *sarx*, translated "flesh." But the term is not limited to describing only the fleshly parts of our body, as the word is in English. It means "the whole man." The translators of the New International Version are therefore right on target when they translate "as to his human nature." This "nature" is contrasted with Christ's divine nature, which is described as "the Spirit of holiness." That phrase does not refer to the Holy Spirit (though many have interpreted it this way), but to Christ's own spiritual or divine nature, which is holy. In other words, the first important thing about this section is its clear recognition of both the human and divine natures of Jesus.

Note also the contrast between "descendant of David" and "Son of God." This corresponds to the aforementioned distinction, because "descendant of David" speaks of Jesus' human nature (it is as a man that he was born into David's family tree), while "Son of God" is linked to his divinity.

The really interesting point is the contrast between the word *was*, the verb used in the first part of this descriptive sentence, and *declared*, which is the verb in part two. However, I need to point out that "was" is a weak rendering of the word Paul actually used. In Greek the word is *ginomai*, which means "become," "take place," "happen" or, in some cases "be born" or even "come into being." "Was" describes a past state or condition, but it can be a timeless state. "Became" shows that something came into existence that was not in existence previously. And, of course, this is precisely what happened in our Lord's incarnation. Before his birth to Mary at what we call the beginning of the Christian era, Jesus was God and always had been God. (That is why the other verb is "declared." He was declared to be God.) But he *became* man at a particular past point in history by the incarnation.

In verses 3 and 4, a brief message of only twenty-eight Greek words (forty-one in English), Paul has provided us with an entire Christology.

Great David's Greater Son

There is a debate among those who have studied Romans as to whether the church to which Paul was writing was predominantly Jewish or predominantly Gentile or a mixture of the two. I believe that it was a predominantly Gentile church and that the epistle should be understood in that light. But, as previously mentioned, it is nevertheless also true that Paul saw the gospel as growing out of its Jewish roots and makes that point frequently.

An example occurs in the words "descendant of David" in verse 3. We have noted that this phrase appears in the long sentence describing the two natures of the Lord Jesus Christ, but it goes beyond what we might have thought necessary for the apostle to say. In contrasting Christ's human nature with his divine nature, it would have been possible for Paul merely to say, "who as to his human nature was *a man* [or a *true man*]." That is indeed the chief point of the passage.

But instead of this, he says, "was a descendant of David," thus bringing in the whole matter of Jesus' Jewish ancestry.

Why does Paul do this? There are several reasons.

1. *By referring to Jesus as a "descendant of David," Paul gives substance to his main contention, namely, that Jesus was a true human being.* It is not that Jesus was merely *a* man in some vague, mystical way, but that he became a specific man whose existence was grounded in a particular human ancestry. Although we do not have any pictures of Jesus, if we had lived in his day and had possessed a camera then, we could have taken one. His eyes and hair had a certain color. He weighed so many pounds. Furthermore, we could have talked to him as well as to his mother and father, brothers and sisters and friends. He would have had stories to tell about his human relatives.

2. *By referring to Jesus as a "descendant of David," Paul gives a specific example of the things "promised beforehand" by God "in the Holy Scriptures."* There were many things prophesied concerning the Christ—where he would be born, how he would be treated by his people, the nature of his death, the fact of his resurrection. But one of the chief promises was that he would be born of David's line and would therefore be eligible to sit on David's throne and reign forever as the true king of Israel. Isaiah said, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse [David's father]; From his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isa. 11:1).

Jeremiah was even more explicit:

> *"The days are coming," declares the LORD,*
> *"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.*
> *In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.*
> *This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."*
>
> Jeremiah 23:5-6

The way in which these prophecies were fulfilled is quite remarkable, because there seemed to be a problem regarding the family from which a claimant to the throne of David might come. The difficulty was that there were two lines of descendency from King David. One was the line of Solomon, who had reigned on David's throne after the death of his father. Normally, there would be no question but that an elder son of a family descended from King Solomon would reign. But in Jeremiah 22:30, in the chapter just before the one prophesying "a righteous Branch" that would arise in David's line, a harsh curse is pronounced on a king named Jehoiachin, the last of the actual reigning kings descended from King Solomon: "Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime: for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah." Because of God's curse, no king descended in that line could reign legitimately.

There was another strong line of descent, however. King Solomon had an older brother, Nathan, who would have been king if God had not

given the throne to Solomon. Nathan had also produced descendants, but any descendant of this line who claimed inheritance of the promises made to King David would have been challenged immediately by descendants in the line that had actually reigned. How could such a dilemma be solved? There was a lack of reigning kings in one line and a curse on the other.

The way God solved the issue was so simple that it confounds the wisest skeptics. The line of Solomon ran on through the centuries until it eventually produced Joseph, who was betrothed to the Virgin Mary and eventually became her husband, though not until after she had conceived and given birth to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was not descended from Joseph; otherwise he would have inherited the curse on that line. But when Joseph took Mary under his protection and thus became the adoptive father of her divine child, he passed the right of royalty to him. And since Jesus was also descended from Mary—who, as it turns out, was a descendant of David through the line of Nathan—Jesus combined the claims of the two lines in his unique personhood and thereby eliminated the possibility of there ever being any other legitimate claimant to the throne. In other words, if Jesus is not the Messiah who has descended from David according to the Old Testament prophecies, there will never be a Messiah. For Jesus had no human children, and each of his brothers (who are the only other possibilities through whom another Messiah might descend) had the curse on him and would have passed it on to his children.

Paul's reference to Jesus' descent from David in Romans 1:3 is quite brief, of course. But these details of his ancestry, as I have given them, would undoubtedly have formed the substance of much longer expositions by Paul in many teaching situations.

3. *By referring to Jesus as a "descendant of David," Paul prepares the way for the exalted title he is going to give him at the end of this great sentence, namely, "Lord."* One of the problems the apostle faced in his missionary work among the Gentiles is that in the eyes of many people the Jesus he preached was only a common criminal, properly executed, and therefore hardly to be extolled. But Jesus is actually a descendant of

the great King David, says Paul. And what is even more important, he is the king announced in prophecy—the king who was also the Son of God. He is, therefore, not merely the King of the Jews, but the King of all men. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, the very essence of Christianity.

The Sovereign Son

This brings me to the last point of these verses, based on something Paul says about Jesus in the second half of his long descriptive sentence regarding the Lord's two natures. He says that Jesus "was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead." How are we to understand that? Particularly, how are we to understand the phrase "with power"?

The most common way of understanding these words is to relate "with power" to "his resurrection," as if Paul was thinking of the resurrection as a striking revelation of God's power. Using this approach, the words "Spirit of holiness" would be seen as referring to the Holy Spirit, viewed as the agent of the resurrection; and this powerful resurrection, accomplished by the Spirit, would be seen as a proof of Christ's deity. It is true, of course, that the resurrection was accomplished by God's power and is itself proof of Christ's claims. But the Bible does not actually speak of the Holy Spirit's raising Jesus from the dead. The Father is the One who is said to have done that. Even more significantly, we have already seen that the words "Spirit of holiness" refer to Christ's divine nature—the words *kata pneuma* ("according to spirit") parallel the words *kata sarka* ("according to flesh")—and not to the third person of the Trinity. That alone seems to exclude the most popular interpretation of "with power."

A second understanding links "with power" to the declaration of Christ's deity. That is, it views Paul as thinking of a powerful or effective declaration, one that accomplishes its ends. Charles Hodge and F. Godet held this interpretation.

It is significant, however, that in the Greek text the words "with power" follow immediately after the words "Son of God" so that the text

literally reads: "... declared the Son of God with power according to a spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead." This gives us a third understanding of what is going on in this sentence. In this view the words "with power" are linked to "Son of God," so that we might more properly understand Paul to be speaking of "the Son of God with power" or "the powerful Son of God," which he is declared to be by the resurrection. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones takes this view, rightly I think, and explains it like this:

The Lord Jesus Christ... was the Son of God before. He is always the Son of God. He was the Son of God before the incarnation and from all eternity.... Where then is the variation?... It is in the form that he assumes; and what we have been told in verse 3 is that when he came into this world he did not come as the Son of God with power. No! He came as a helpless babe.... He was Son of God—yes; but not Son of God with power. In other words, when he came as a babe, the power of the Son of God was veiled in the flesh.... But what the apostle says is, that in the resurrection he is "declared to be the Son of God with *power."* It is there that we realize how powerful he is.

The point of this should be clear to everyone. It is not merely a case of Paul's declaring that the resurrection was a demonstration of the great power of God or even that the resurrection was a powerful demonstration of the validity of Christ's claims. It is not that at all. Rather, it is actually a strong declaration about the Lord's own person—precisely the purpose of this entire section and the point on which Paul will end. It is a declaration that Jesus is the sovereign Son of God and therefore rightly the "Lord" of all men as well as the Savior.

The conclusion of this, which in this study comes at the end instead of being scattered through the chapter, is that Jesus Christ, the very essence of Christianity, is your Lord and that you ought rightly to turn from all sin and worship him. You may dispute his claims. But if they are true, if Jesus is who the apostle Paul declares him to be in this epistle and others, there is no other reasonable or right option open to you than total and heart-deep allegiance. Colonel Robert Ingersoll, the famous agnostic of the last century, was no friend of Christianity. But

he saw certain things clearly; and he said on one occasion, though in a critical vein, "Christianity cannot live in peace with any other form of faith. If that religion be true, there is but one Savior, one inspired book and but one little narrow... path that leads to heaven. Such a religion is necessarily uncompromising."

That statement is true because the Lord Jesus Christ is himself uncompromising. He is uncompromising because of who he is. Is he the eternal Son of God now made man for your salvation? Is he the Lord? If he is, you ought to heed his call—the call of the gospel—and follow him.

Chapter 4.
Jesus Christ Our Lord

Romans 1:4b

One of the excellencies of the New International Version is the way it handles the word order of the opening verses of Romans, reserving the words "Jesus Christ our Lord" until the end of verse 4, where they appear as a natural and effective climax. This is an improvement over the King James Version, which does not follow the Greek at this point and inserts the words earlier.

I emphasize this because the words "Jesus is Lord" constituted the earliest Christian creed and were therefore of the greatest possible importance to the early church. From the earliest days it was recognized that if a person confessed "Jesus is Lord," he or she was to be received for baptism. This is because, on the one hand, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3) and because, on the other hand, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). To us, reading these records at a later date, it may seem strange that "Jesus is Lord" (*Kyrios ’Iēsous*, Greek) could be so important to our spiritual predecessors, but the reason is that they simply overflow with meaning.

To say that Jesus is Lord implies two things. First, it implies that Jesus is God. Second, it implies that Jesus is the Savior.

"Lord"

The first of these implications is due to the fact that in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which was well known to the Jewish community of the first century and from which most of the New Testament writers quoted when citing Scripture, *kyrios* ("Lord") is used to translate the Hebrew name for God: *Yahweh*, or *Jehovah*. This is why most of our English Bibles do not use the name *Yahweh* but have *Lord* instead. The disciples of Christ knew that this word was repeatedly used to translate this great name for God. Yet, knowing this, they did not hesitate to transfer the title to Jesus, thereby indicating that in their view Jesus is Jehovah.

We need to be careful at this point, of course, because not all uses of "Lord" in the New
Testament imply divinity. "Lord" was a bit like our English word *sir.* On the lowest level it could be used merely as a form of polite address. That is why, according to the Gospels, apparent unbelievers frequently called Jesus "Lord." This does not mean that they had received a sudden revelation of who he was but only that they were treating him with the respect due a distinguished rabbi; they were being polite. On the other hand, "Lord" could mean more. When we speak of *Sir* Winston Churchill we are using "sir" as a title. Similarly, those who called Jesus "Lord" were sometimes confessing that he was their "Master" by this greeting. In the most exalted instances, as in Thomas's stirring post-resurrection confession, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), the word was linked to the early disciples' belief in Christ's divinity.

This is the meaning of *kyrios* in the Christological passages of the New Testament. Here are some examples.

1. *1 Corinthians 8:4-6.* "... We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are

many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." The background for this passage is the polytheism of the Greek world, which Paul is refuting here. He is arguing that there is but one God, who is one with Jesus. The parallelism between "from whom all things came and for whom we live" (applied to God the Father) and "through whom all things came and through whom we live" (applied to Jesus Christ) makes this identification plain.

2. *Luke 2:11*. A second example is from the Christmas story. In this verse the angel tells the shepherds, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." The important thing here is that "Lord" is in the nominative case, as is "Christ," rather than being in the genitive case. If the word had been a genitive, the announcement would have concerned "the Lord's Christ," which would have been perfectly correct but would have meant no more than that Jesus was a specially chosen man, like one of the Old Testament kings, priests, or prophets. Because the word is in the nominative case, the statement actually goes beyond this to mean

"Christ [who is] the Lord."

3. *Psalm 110:1*. On one occasion, recorded in Matthew 22:41-46, Jesus asked his enemies who they thought the Christ was to be. They replied, "The son of David." This was true as far as it went; but they were thinking of an earthly, human Messiah, and Jesus wanted them to see farther. So he referred them to this Old Testament text, asking, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (vv. 43-45). Jesus' point was that if David called the Messiah "Lord," it could only be because the Messiah was to be more than just one of his

descendants. He would have to be a divine Messiah, which is what the title "Lord" indicates.

Peter had this text in mind when he told the Sanhedrin, "God exalted him [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Savior..." (Acts 5:31).

Paul was also thinking of this when he wrote, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your heart on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1).

The author of Hebrews used the text early in his letter (and also at two later points): "After he [the Son] had provided purification for [our] sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb. 1:3; cf. 8:1; 12:2).

4. *Philippians 2:5-11.* The great Christological hymn of Philippians 2 is the clearest textual statement that "Jesus is Lord," that is, one with God.

> *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*
> *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*
> *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*
> *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

What is the "name that is above every name"? It is not the name "Jesus" itself, though the wording seems to suggest this to the English reader. It is the name "Lord"; for that is God's own name, and no name can be higher than that.

The meaning of this tide shows why the early Christians would not apply the name "Lord" to any other. If they had done so, they would

have been repudiating Christ. One famous case is that of the aged Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, who was martyred on February 22, a.d. 156. As he was driven to the arena, two of the city officials, who had respect for him because of his age and reputation, tried to persuade him to comply with the demand to honor Caesar. "What harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and burning incense... and saving yourself?" they asked. Polycarp refused. Later, in the arena, he explained his position, saying, "For eighty-six years I have been [Christ's] slave, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" Polycarp refused to call Caesar "Lord," because "Lord" meant "God" and there can only be one God. If Polycarp had called Caesar "Lord," then Jesus could not have been "Lord" for Polycarp, and Polycarp could not have been a Christian.

Those who recorded Polycarp's story shared his convictions, for they concluded by saying: "He [Polycarp] was arrested by Herod, when Philip of Tralles was high priest, and Statius Quadratus was governor, *but our Lord Jesus Christ was reigning forever.* To him be glory, honor, majesty and eternal dominion from generation to generation. Amen."

Lord and Savior

The second implication of the title "Lord" is that Jesus is the Savior. This is linked to his lordship because, as John R. W. Stott writes:

The title "Lord" is a symbol of Christ's victory over the forces of evil. If Jesus has been exalted over all the principalities and powers of evil, as indeed he has, this is the reason why he has been called Lord. If Jesus has been proclaimed Lord, as he has, it is because these powers are under his feet. He has conquered them on the cross, and therefore our salvation—that is to say, our rescue from sin, Satan, fear and death—is due to that victory.

In recent years it has become customary in some parts of the evangelical world to distinguish between the lordship and the saviorhood of Christ in such a way that one is supposed to be able to have Jesus as Savior without having him as Lord. This is the view, for

example, of Charles C. Ryrie, former Dean of Doctoral Studies and Professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas
Theological Seminary. Reacting to statements by Arthur W. Pink, J. I. Packer and John R. W.
Stott in a variety of publications, Ryrie argues that any attempt to link "Jesus as Lord" to "Jesus as Savior" is the equivalent of adding "commitment" to "faith" in salvation. And since "the message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel... one of them is a false gospel and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel (Gal. 1:6-9)."

There are two serious mistakes at this point. One involves the meaning of faith, which Ryrie seems to detach from commitment. Is "faith" minus "commitment" a true biblical faith? Hardly! Biblical faith involves three elements: (1) *knowledge*, upon which it is based; (2) *heart response*, which results from the new birth; and (3) *commitment*, without which "faith" is no different from the assent of the demons, who only "believe that and shudder" (James 2:19). Faith without commitment is no true faith. It is a dead faith that will save no one.

The second mistake is even more serious, because it involves the person and work of Jesus himself. Who is this one who has saved us from our sins? He is, as Paul has it, "Jesus Christ our Lord." No true Christian will add anything to the finished work of Jesus. To do so is really to proclaim a false gospel. We direct people to the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, he is the *Lord* Jesus Christ. This Lord is the object of faith and its content. There is no other. Consequently, if faith is directed to one who is not Lord, it is directed to one who is a false Christ of the imagination. Such a one is not the Savior, and he will save no one.

Is He *Our* Lord?

At this point it is easy for some of us to sit back and congratulate ourselves on having a sound theology. Of course, we know that Jesus must be Lord to be Savior. Of course, we know that true faith involves commitment. But is Jesus really *our* Lord? Are we truly committed to

him? In the study of Christ's lordship by John Stott, from which I quoted earlier, six implications are suggested:

1. *An intellectual implication.* If Jesus is our Lord, one thing he must be Lord of is our thinking. He must be Lord of our minds. On one occasion, when the Lord called disciples, he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." (Matt. 11:29), meaning that he was to be the disciples' teacher. He is to be our teacher today.

How does Jesus do this, seeing that he is not with us physically as he was in the time of the disciples? The answer is that he teaches us through Scripture. That is why we must be men and women of the Book —if we truly are Christ's followers. Left to ourselves, we will stray into many kinds of false thinking just as the world does. But if we regularly read and study the Bible, asking the Holy Spirit to interpret it for us, and then try to live out what we understand, we will increasingly come to think as Christ thinks and discover that we have an entirely new outlook on the world. We will see people from God's perspective, and we will not be taken in by the world's false ideas.

2. *An ethical implication.* In the study I referred to earlier, Stott points out that Jesus is not just Lord of our minds. He is Lord of our wills and of our moral standards also.

It is not only what we believe that is to come under the lordship of Jesus but also how we behave. Discipleship implies obedience, and obedience implies that there are absolute moral commands that we are required to obey. To refer to Jesus politely as "our Lord" is not enough.
He still says to us, "Why do you call me Lord and do not the things that I say?" In today's
miasma of relativity we need to maintain unashamedly the absolute moral standards of the Lord. Further, we need to go on and teach that the yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light, and that under the yoke of Jesus we have not bondage but freedom and rest.

3. *A vocational implication.* If Jesus is Lord, then he is not only Lord of our minds, wills, and morals, but he is also Lord of our time;

this means that he is Lord of our professions, jobs, careers, and ambitions. We cannot plan our lives as if our relationship to Jesus is somehow detached from those plans and irrelevant to them.

Paul is an example at this point. Before he met Christ on the road to Damascus and bowed before him, Paul was pursuing a vocation of his own choice. He was a Pharisee and intent on rising high in the intellectual and ruling structures of Judaism. He knew where he was going. When he met Jesus all this was redirected. The first words Jesus uttered after he had stopped Paul cold by asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4) and by identifying himself as Jesus, were: "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (v. 6). Paul obeyed Jesus and was indeed told what he was to do. He was to be Christ's apostle to the Gentiles. Later, when Paul gave a defense of his activities before King Agrippa, he quoted the Lord as saying to him, "I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God..." (Acts 26:16-18). Paul concluded, "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" (v. 19).

This is precisely the way we must regard our vocations. We may not be called to be apostles, as Paul was. Only a few are called to what we term "religious work." But whether we work in a church or a factory, in a hospital, a law firm, or our own small business, whether we are homemakers or builders of homes—whatever our calling, we must regard it as a form of Christian service and know that we are obeying our Lord Jesus Christ as we pursue it.

4. *An ecclesiastical implication.* Jesus is also head of the church. This truth can deliver us from two banes. One is disorder. It occurs when those who are members of the church pursue their own course—including what they wish their church to be—without regard to the guidelines for church life laid down in the Bible or without proper consideration for those who are their brothers and

sisters in the Lord. The second is clericalism. It occurs when laypeople abandon their God-given roles in the church or when pastors tyrannize the church without acknowledging that they are servants of the people as well as servants of Christ and that they must serve the church as Jesus served it.

5. *A political implication.* Today, when we talk about the lordship of Christ, we face a battle on two fronts. One is an intra-mural contest, which goes on within the Christian fellowship. It is the battle I was speaking about earlier when I repudiated certain attempts to separate the saving work of Christ from his lordship.

But there is another battle also, and it is extra-mural. That is, it is outside the church's fellowship. It comes from those who, in a certain sense, may be quite tolerant of religion, but who insist that religion must be kept in its place—"on the reservation"—and that, above all, it must not intrude into our national life. We are fighting this battle every day. And we are saying—I *hope* we are saying—that Jesus is not only our own personal Lord and not only Lord of the church that he founded; he is also Lord of all life, the life of nations included. He is not merely *our* King; he is the King of kings. He is not merely *our* Lord; he is the Lord of lords. Therefore, we who are Christians stand as his representatives in history to call this world to account. We are here to remind the world that this same Jesus Christ whom we serve has spoken from heaven to reveal what true righteousness is, both for individuals and nations, and that those who disregard him do so at their own peril and must one day give an account.

Yet this must be done correctly. First, it must be done humbly. For none of us is perfect—we, too, must appear before Jesus—and those we speak to are ultimately answerable to him and not to us. Second, we must know that our mission is to be by example and word and not by force. Otherwise we will become triumphalists. We must remember that the Lord did not come to set up an army or even a political organization, but rather a witnessing fellowship. Whenever the church has departed from the Lord's pattern in this area, it has always done so to its harm.

6. *A global implication.* If Jesus is our Lord, the final implication flows from the Great Commission by which, on the basis of his own authority, the Lord sent disciples into the entire world to make and disciple Christians everywhere (Matt. 28:18-20). The lordship of Jesus is the most powerful of missionary incentives. It is as Lord of our lives that he tells us to go; because we know him as Lord, this is exactly what we do. Because we love him, we want everyone to become his disciples.

I close with the questions I asked at the beginning of this list. Is Jesus your Lord? Are you truly committed to him? If you are, your life can never be what it would be otherwise. If he is your Lord, no other can ever take his place.

Chapter 5.
The Obedience of Faith

Romans 1:5

It is a puzzle to me that whenever I write about the lordship of Jesus Christ, as I did in the previous chapter, stressing that one must follow Jesus and submit to him to be a Christian, some people always object that an emphasis like this destroys the gospel. If Jesus must be Lord, then salvation cannot be by "simple" faith, they argue. If we insist that one must follow Christ, we must be mingling works with faith as a means of salvation, which is "another gospel."

No matter that I show what true biblical faith is! No matter that I explain how obedience and faith both necessarily follow from regeneration!

I suppose that Paul had this problem, too, if for no other reason than that the human mind seems to work much the same way in all people. I believe Paul had these difficulties because of the way he develops his thoughts in the opening verses of Romans. In the Greek text the first seven verses of the book are one long sentence, not an unusual form for

one writing in good Greek style. Nevertheless, there has been a natural and significant climax at the end of verse 4 in the words "Jesus Christ our Lord." This is the point to which the earlier verses have been leading, and it would have been quite proper, as well as good Greek, if Paul had ended his sentence there.

Why does he not do this? Why does he add the thoughts in verse 5 before the wrap-up to the introduction in verses 6 and 7? The answer is along the lines I am describing. The apostle has spoken of Jesus Christ as "Lord." Now, knowing how people think when confronted with that idea, he feels the need to amplify his statement.

Must Jesus be Lord if one is to be saved by him? If he must, this will have an effect on the way we understand the gospel and obey Christ's command to evangelize the world.

Disobedience and Obedience

The key words of verse 5 are those the New International Version translates as "to the obedience that comes from faith" (literally, "unto obedience of faith"). There are two ways this phrase can be interpreted. First, it can be interpreted as referring to the obedience which faith produces or in which it results. I think this is not the true meaning. But it is worth noting that, even if this is the correct interpretation, the point I have been making is still plain, since Paul would be saying that true biblical faith must produce obedience. If the "faith" one has does not lead to obedience, it is not the faith the Bible is talking about when it calls us to faith in Jesus Christ. It may be intellectual assent of a very high order. But it is not a living faith. It does not join us to Jesus Christ, and it will save no one.

Yet the case is even stronger than this, because a proper interpretation of the phrase is not "unto the obedience to which faith leads" (the first interpretation) but rather "unto obedience, the very nature of which is faith" (the second interpretation). Or, to turn it around, we could say, "faith, which *is* obedience."

This is such an important point that I want to establish it a bit more fully before going on to show why it is important. The way I want to do this is to show that it is the view of the most important commentators. Let me cite a few, starting with the most recent and moving backwards.

1. *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:* "The Apostle says... 'the obedience of faith' in order to bring out this point—that he is talking about an obedience which consists in faith, or, if you like, an obedience of which faith is the central principle."

2. *John Murray:* "It is... intelligible and suitable to take 'faith' as in apposition to 'obedience' and understand it as the obedience which consists in faith. Faith is regarded as an act of obedience, or commitment to the gospel of Christ."

3. *Charles Hodge:* "The obedience of faith is that obedience which consists in faith, or of which faith is the controlling principle."

4. *Robert Haldane:* "The gospel reforms those who believe it; but it would be presenting an imperfect view of the subject to say that it was given to reform the world. It was given that men might believe and be saved. The obedience, then, here referred to, signifies submission to the doctrine of the gospel."

5. *F. Godet:* "The only possible meaning is: the obedience *which consists of* faith itself."

6. *Martin Luther* (contrasting Paul's demand with human arguments): "Paul here speaks of

'obedience to the faith' and not of obedience to such wisdom as first must be proved by

arguments of reason and experience. It is not at all his intention to prove what he says, but he demands of his readers implicit trust in him as one having divine authority."

7. *John Calvin:* "By stating the purpose of his call Paul again reminds the Romans of his office, as though he were saying, 'It is my duty to discharge the responsibility entrusted to me, which is

> to preach the word. It is your responsibility to hear the word and wholly obey it, unless you want to make void the calling which the Lord has bestowed on me.' We deduce from this that those who irreverently and contemptuously reject the preaching of the gospel, the design of which is to bring us into obedience to God, are stubbornly resisting the power of God and perverting the whole of his order."

I have taken several pages to make this point because, as I said at the beginning, it is an extremely important matter. It is important because it affects how we understand the gospel and how we seek to obey Christ's command to evangelize. How is it that most of today's evangelism is conducted? It is true, is it not, that for the most part the gospel is offered to people as something that (in our opinion) is good for them and will make them happy but that they are at perfect liberty to refuse! "The Holy Spirit is a gentleman," we are sometimes told. "He would never coerce anybody." With a framework like this, sin becomes little more than bad choices and faith only means beginning to see the issues clearly.

What is missing in this contemporary approach is the recognition that sin primarily is disobedience and that God commands us to repent and repudiate it. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Sin is not just that which I do that is wrong and which makes me feel miserable afterwards... not just that which spoils my life and makes me feel miserable and unhappy... not just that thing which gets me down and which I would like to overcome." It is that, but it is also much more. Primarily, sin is rebellion against God. "Sin is refusal to listen to the voice of God. Sin is a turning of your back upon God and doing what you think." So, when the gospel is preached, it must be preached not merely as an invitation to experience life to the full or even to accept God's invitation. It must be preached as a command. (This is why Paul is so concerned to stress his role as an apostle, as one called and commissioned to be God's ambassador.) We are commanded to turn from our sinful disobedience to God and instead obey him by believing in and following the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

This is the way Paul himself preached the gospel, though we frequently overlook it because of our own weak methods. Do you remember how Paul concluded his great sermon to the Athenians? "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he *commands* all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed..." (Acts 17:30-31, italics mine). In God's name, Paul commanded the Greeks to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus.

It is the same in Romans. In Romans 6:17 Paul summarizes the response of the Roman Christians to the gospel by saying, "Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly *obeyed* the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (italics mine, here and in the subsequent citations). In Romans 10 he argues that the Jews "did not *submit* to God's righteousness" (v. 3); in verse 16 he says, "But they have not all *obeyed* the gospel..." (KJV). At the end of the letter the idea appears again in a great benediction: "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the *command* of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and *obey* him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Rom. 16:25-27).

In my opinion, the weakness of much of our contemporary Christianity can be traced to a deficiency at precisely this point. By failing to present the gospel as a command to be obeyed we minimize sin, trivialize discipleship, rob God of his glory, and delude some into thinking that all is well with their souls when actually they are without Christ and are perishing.

Pelagius and Jonathan Edwards

But there may be an objection at this point. It comes from those who know theology and are aware that, according to Paul's later teaching in Romans, everyone is so deeply ensnared by sin that even though the gospel may be preached to us, apart from the grace of God we are not

able to repent and obey God's commands. This was the point that bothered Pelagius and led to his deviant theology and the resulting clash with Saint Augustine. Pelagius felt that if we are commanded to do something, we must be able to do it. "Ought" implies "can." But instead of throwing out the command (which is what most people seem to want to do today), Pelagius threw out the inability, arguing that we can turn from sin, believe on Christ, and pursue obedience in our own strength, entirely unaided by the Holy Spirit.

The problem here is that Pelagius was overlooking the nature of our inability, which he would have understood better had he paid more attention to the command for obedience. The inability of man in his fallen state is not a physical inability, as if God were demanding that a paralyzed person get up and walk to him. A person so impaired really would have an excuse for failing to do that, but that is not the right analogy. The inability we have is not a physical inability but a moral one. That is, we do not obey God, not because we cannot obey him physically, but because we *will* not obey God. It is this that makes the command to obey so important and our disobedience so reprehensible.

Let me give you one illustration. Jonathan Edwards, who is probably the greatest theologian America has produced, wrote his most impressive treatise on the "Freedom of the Will," and at one point toward the end of the treatise he had this answer for those who think the biblical doctrines unreasonable:

Let common sense determine whether there be not a great difference between these two cases: the one, that of a man who has offended his prince, and is cast into prison; and after he has lain there a while, the king comes to him, calls him to come forth; and tells him, that if he will do so, and will fall down before him and humbly beg his pardon, he shall be forgiven, and set at liberty, and also be greatly enriched, and advanced to honor: the prisoner heartily repents of the folly and wickedness of his offense against his prince, is thoroughly disposed to abase himself, and accept the king's offer; but is confined by strong walls, with gates of brass, and bars of iron. The other case is, that of a man who is of a very unreasonable spirit, of a haughty, ungrateful,

willful disposition; and moreover, has been brought up in traitorous principles; and has his heart possessed with an extreme and inveterate enmity to his lawful sovereign; and for his rebellion is cast into prison, and lies long there, loaded with heavy chains, and in miserable circumstances. At length the compassionate prince comes to the prison, orders his chains to be knocked off, and his prison doors to be set wide open; calls to him and tells him, if he will come forth to him, and fall down before him, acknowledge that he has treated him unworthily, and ask his forgiveness; he shall be forgiven, set at liberty, and set in a place of great dignity and profit in his court. But he is so stout, and full of haughty malignity, that he cannot be willing to accept the offer; his rooted strong pride and malice have perfect power over him, and as it were bind him, by binding his heart: the opposition of his heart has the mastery over him, having an influence on his mind far superior to the king's grace and condescension, and to all his kind offers and promises. Now, is it agreeable to common sense, to assert and stand to it, that there is no difference between these two cases, as to any worthiness of blame in the prisoners?

When we first come upon an illustration like that, our reaction is to say that it is not an accurate description of our case, that we are not like the stubborn prisoner. But that is precisely what the Bible teaches we are like. Consequently, it is important for the gospel to be presented to the unsaved as a command and to have it stressed that God will hold us accountable if we persist in sin and refuse to bow before our rightful Lord.

Apostle of God's Grace

Yet, as **I** draw toward the end of this chapter, I must add that although the demand that we repent of sin and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ is a command, it is nevertheless a command that comes to us in the context of the gospel. And, remember, the gospel is not bad news; it is good news. Above all, it is the good news of God's grace.

I suppose that is why the word *grace* appears in verse 5—for the first time in the letter. It will occur again; it occurs just two verses later, in

verse 7. In fact, it will be found a total of twentytwo times in the course of the epistle. "Grace" is one of the great words of Romans and a wonderful concept. In my opinion, the word occurs here because even though Paul is stressing the Lordship of Christ and the necessity of obeying God in response to the demands of the gospel, at the same time he is also keenly aware that those who respond to the gospel do so only because God is already graciously at work in them and because the gospel is itself the means by which the unmerited favor of God toward us is made operative.

What is this "grace"? Grace is often defined as God's favor toward the undeserving, but it is more than that. If we have understood Jonathan Edwards's illustration of the stubborn, rebellious prisoner, we know that it is actually God's favor toward those who deserve the precise opposite. What we deserve is hell. We do not even deserve a chance to hear the gospel, let alone experience the regenerating work of God within, by which we are enabled to turn from sin and obey Jesus. We deserve God's wrath. We deserve his fierce condemnation. But instead of wrath, we find grace. Instead of condemnation, we find the One who in our place bore God's judgment and now lives to rule over us.

I do not know what went through the mind of Paul as he wrote these words. I know only what I read in the text. But I suspect that Paul was thinking of his own experience of God's grace as he mentions the matter of his apostleship again in verse 5, saying that it was through Christ that he "received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles."

There is a passage in 1 Corinthians that gives a clue to what is going on. Paul had been writing of Christ's resurrection appearances and had added that after appearing to James and all the other apostles, Jesus had appeared to him as to one "abnormally born." Then he added, in words that were not demanded by the context but which undoubtedly flowed from Paul's acute sense of God's rich grace toward him, "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I

am, and his grace to me was not without effect..." (1 Cor. 15:9-10).

Like all who have been truly converted, Paul could never forget what he had been apart from God's grace.

He had been self-righteous.

He had been cruel.

He had been fighting against the goads of God in his conscience.

He had been trying to destroy God's work by his persecution of the infant church.

But God had stopped him and had brought him to a right mind. Up to that point he had been disobeying God. But when Jesus revealed himself to him on the road to Damascus, the rebellious will of the future apostle to the Gentiles was broken and Paul became Jesus' obedient servant and disciple. How could that be? How could one so rebellious be brought to his knees before Jesus? There is only one answer. It was the grace of God. Only the grace of God can produce such changes. Only a gracious God would want to.

Why is it that we so easily fall into either of two wrong emphases when we present the gospel? Either we present the gospel as something so easy and simplistic that it fails to deal with sin and does not really produce conversions. Or else we present a harsh gospel, forgetting that it is only the love of God and not the condemnation of the law that wins anybody.

And there is one more point to be made. It is only the gracious love of God that motivates us to be his ambassadors. We are not apostles, as Paul was, but we have a corresponding function. We are God's witnesses in this world, and, like Paul, we are to take the gospel to the nations. What will motivate us to do that and will actually keep us at it when the going gets hard? There is only one thing: remembrance of the grace of God, which we have first received. Paul said this in 2 Corinthians: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that

those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:14-15, 18).

Chapter 6.
Those Roman Christians

Romans 1:6-7

Perhaps you have at some time picked up a letter, begun to read it, been confused by what was being said, and then flipped to the end—perhaps through several pages of nearly undecipherable handwriting—looking for the signature while you asked yourself, "Who in the world is writing this?" I have done that many times, and I have thought that it would be a lot easier if we began our letters like most ancient writers did.

Writers of old started their letters with three elements: (1) the name of the writer, (2) the name of those to whom he or she was writing, and (3) a greeting. A typical ancient letter might begin like this one from the commander of the Roman garrison at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 23: "Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings" (v. 26). "Claudius Lysias," the first element in the introduction, is the name of the garrison commander. The second element is "His Excellency, Governor Felix," the name of the person to whom he is writing. Finally, there is the salutation, which in this case is merely "Greetings." The whole is a bit like the start of one of today's inner-office memos. After these formal elements, the commander gets down to the body of the letter, which explains why he is writing it.

Paul's letter to the Romans is styled like this, yet Paul is so filled with his basic theme—the gospel of God centered in Jesus Christ—that he inevitably adds a lot more to the introduction. He begins simply enough: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus...." But as he begins to explain a bit further just who he is ("called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God"), the word *gospel* sets him off explaining what that

gospel of God is about. It is a gospel "promised beforehand... in the Holy Scriptures," concerning God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, "who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead." If we did not know him better, we might think that Paul is already well into his letter at this point. But Paul now brings the description of the gospel back to himself and his apostleship, the point with which he began: "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." Then, having returned to his starting point, he proceeds to the next two elements of the classical introduction: "And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus
Christ."

This introduction is like a sine wave in mathematics. It begins low, swells to a great peak, and then falls back to an emotional low point again: Paul's reference to the Roman Christians and his greeting to them.

Where Did They Come From?

Yet this wrap-up is not uninteresting. In the first place, it is noteworthy because of the church at Rome itself. Even at this early date—Paul is writing about a.d. 58 or 59, less than thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the faith of this church was being spoken of "all over the world" (Rom. 1:8). Later, as we know, the church at Rome became increasingly strong, influential, and powerful—eventually corrupt. Even today the church of Rome is a powerful force in Christendom.

Where did this church come from? How did it get started? One thing we can say is that Paul himself did not found it. God had called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Rome was a Gentile city. Yet, as he himself says in verse 13, although Paul had wanted to come to Rome many

times, he was prevented from doing so, presumably by pressing missionary concerns. Paul got to Rome later, and Luke tells us about it in Acts. But this was many years after the church in Rome had been founded.

Catholic tradition holds that the Roman church was founded by the apostle Peter and that he was the first pope. I do not think it is necessary to argue, as some Protestants have, that Peter was never in Rome. On the contrary, I think an early church document, "The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians," implies, though it does not prove, that he was there. But that is not the same thing as saying that Peter founded the Roman church, and the evidence on that point is quite the other way. We know from the long list of names in the last chapter of Romans that Paul knew a great deal about the Roman church, even though he had not been there, yet nowhere in that chapter or elsewhere does he mention Peter, which is nearly inconceivable if Peter was in Rome or if he had founded the Roman church. Indeed, Paul says that it had always been his ambition "to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (Rom. 15:20). It is hard to see how Paul could have written this in a doctrinal letter to the Roman church if it had already been founded by Peter and received its early teaching from him.

So how did the church become established? The truth is, we do not know. But there is a suggestion in the second chapter of Acts of what may have happened. That chapter tells about Pentecost, and it gives a list of the many nations that were represented in Jerusalem that day, including "visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism)" (vv. 10-11). Since the text specifically speaks of "*visitors* from Rome," we are probably right in supposing that most of these visitors returned to their capital city after the Jewish feast days and established the first churches in Italy there. If this is the case, the Roman church existed from the very earliest days of the Christian mission.

Moreover, this is a pattern that would have continued. There was a great deal of travel in the ancient world, much more than we might suppose. Rome was the center of these comings and goings. Undoubtedly, people

who had been brought to Christ as a result of Paul's Gentile mission went to and from Rome, and many undoubtedly settled there. This would explain how Paul came to know as many of the Roman Christians as the last chapter shows he did, and it would explain why Paul was not hesitant to write to this church to seek its prayer support for his trip to Jerusalem as well as its financial backing for his projected missionary excursion to Spain (Rom. 15:24, 30-31).

It would also explain why, although the church was undoubtedly composed of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul writes to these believers largely as Gentiles. We see this as early as verse 6, where the phrase "and you also" most naturally picks up from the description of Paul's commission in verse 5: "to call people from among all the Gentiles."

So the first interesting information is that a body of genuine followers of Jesus Christ, whether large or small (we do not know), existed in the capital city of the Roman empire—of all places! We usually think of Rome as the imperial city of the Caesars, glorious in its palaces, marble monuments, and treasures. It was that. But it was also a terrible city, full of horrible sins and gross licentiousness. Vice was everywhere. Yet in this city of gross sin there was a fellowship of people who rejected Rome's sin and instead lived an entirely different kind of life. It was a life marked by holiness, a mutual sharing of burdens, love, and compassion for those who were abused or downtrodden. It was nothing less than a new humanity planted by God atop the deteriorating carcass of the old.

That is what Christianity always is. It is not an outgrowth, not even a quantum leap upward from the world's decaying civilization. It is something utterly new. It is what you are, if you are a Christian—"a new creation" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). It is what your church is, if it is composed of true believers.

How Did They Become Different?

Another interesting thing about the second and third parts of the letter's introduction is what they tell us about the spiritual origins of these

people. Here is a group of people who were in the midst of a corrupt pagan society, yet were entirely different from the mainstream. How did they get to be different? How did they become Christians? In these verses Paul tells us four important things about the early church at Rome.

1. *The Christians at Rome, like all Christians, were called to belong to Jesus Christ.* This is a general description of Christians, which is different from the similar phrase "called to be saints" that occurs in the next verse. What does it mean? Some people have read verse 6 as if it were describing Christians as people "called by Jesus Christ," because the Greek can be translated that way. But here the New International Version is undoubtedly correct when it inserts the words "to belong to." The sense is not that Jesus has called Christians—that is a work usually attributed to God the Father—but rather that, as a result of God's calling, Christians are attached to Jesus and have their true life in that relationship. Before, as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-3, they were "dead in [their] transgressions and sins" and were "by nature objects of wrath." Now, as a result of God's calling, they have been "made alive with Christ" and given "good works" to do (vv. 5, 10).

This is the essential definition of a Christian (a "Christ one"). A Christian is one who belongs to Jesus Christ. This is what makes him or her different and why such a one inevitably seeks the company of others who also belong to Jesus. Nothing is more important than this in a believer's life.

Does this describe you? Do you belong to Jesus Christ? If you do, you will live like it. If you do not, you are no true Christian, regardless of your outward profession.

2. *The Christians at Rome, like all Christians, were loved by God the Father.* This is no bland statement, as if Paul were only declaring that it is God's nature to love and that these citizens of

Rome, like all persons, were therefore loved by him. That is not the way the Bible speaks of God's love. This love is an electing, saving love. So

the statement "loved by God" actually describes how those who are Christians come to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ in the first place.

How indeed? Some think that people become believers by their own unaided choice, as if all we have to do is decide to trust Jesus. But how could we possibly do that if, as we have seen Paul say, each of us is "dead in... transgressions and sins"? How can a dead man decide anything? Some have supposed that we become Christians because God in his omniscience sees some small bit of good in us, even if that "good" is only a tiny seed of faith. But how could God see good in us if, as Paul will later remind us: "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:12; cf. Ps. 14:3)? Why, then, *does* God love us? The answer is "because he loves us." There is just nothing to be said beyond that.

Do you remember how God put it in reference to Israel in the days of Moses? "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you..." (Deut. 7:7-8). The only explanation of why the Lord loved them was that he loved them. It is love and love only.

This is a tremendous thing, if we are Christians. It is something so great we can hardly begin to take it in. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

We are Christians for one reason only and that is that God has set his love upon us. That is the thing that brings us out of the world and out of the dominion of Satan.... And therefore it is not surprising that the apostle here should remind these Christians of this wonderful thing. The world hated them; it persecuted them. They might be arrested at any moment, at the whim of any cruel tyrant who happened to be the emperor, and they might be condemned to death and thrown to the lions in the arena. They were oftentimes hated of all men, so Paul is anxious that they should realize this, that they are the beloved of God; that they are in Christ and that God loves them in the same way as he loves Christ.... Do not rush on to chapters six, seven and eight, saying, 'I want to know about the doctrine of sanctification.' My dear friend, if you

only realized, as you should, that you are loved by God as he loved his own Son, you would learn the most important thing with respect to your sanctification without going any further.

The most important thing is that God has loved us. Therefore, we should love and serve him.

3. *The Christians at Rome, like all Christians, were called to be believers by God.* Here is the same idea that occurs earlier in the phrase "called to belong to Jesus Christ"; but although the meaning of the verb is the same, the emphasis here is different. In the earlier phrase the emphasis was on what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is one who belongs to Jesus Christ; this is his identity. Here the emphasis is on the call itself, and it is a follow-up to the truth that Christians have been loved by God. First, loved. Then, called. The calling is what theologians term

"effectual calling."

There are two kinds of calling in any presentation of the gospel. The first is a general calling, which means that all who hear are called to turn from their sin to Jesus Christ. This calling corresponds to the demand for obedience that I was talking about in the previous chapter. Not all who hear will respond to this call. Not all will obey. Nevertheless, when we call in Christ's words, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened.... Take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt. 11:28-29a), it is a genuine calling. From God's side no barrier is erected. Nothing stands in the way. At the same time, as we also saw, human beings do not obey God if left to themselves. No one responds to God's offer. None want to. So, that some might be saved, God adds to the general call (conveyed to the lost by his servants), a specific call by which God's chosen ones inwardly hear and respond, becoming Christians. The situation is similar to Jesus' call to dead Lazarus. Left to ourselves, we are all spiritual corpses. We cannot do anything. But when God calls savingly, some of these spiritual corpses come to spiritual life and do God's bidding. Anyone who has been saved by God has heard this call in some way and has responded to it.

It may have been—it often is—through preaching. The Word is declared, and somewhere in the church, sitting in a pew with only God looking on, the person involved hears God himself speak. He or she says, "That preacher is describing me. That is my need. It is what I must do." And the person believes! For another it is the quiet witness of a friend who says, "Don't you want to become a Christian? Why don't we pray, and why don't you receive Jesus?" It can be through the quiet reading of the Bible. It can be through a Christian movie, book, or tract. What is common to all these experiences is that God has called and the person has heard him and believed on Jesus Christ.

My good friend R. C. Sproul tells of his conversion during his first year in college. He and a college buddy were exposed to the gospel one night and both "accepted" Jesus. For R. C., life was never the same. He was and remains an entirely different person. But his friend came down from his room the next morning and said, "Wasn't that crazy, what we did last night? I guess I just got carried away. You won't tell anybody about it, will you?" The friend had heard only the call of the preacher. But God had called R. C., and this call, being from God himself, had produced a new man through the new birth or regeneration.

4. *The Christians at Rome, like all Christians, are called saints.* Here "saint" does not mean what it has come to mean in large sectors of the Christian church: one who has attained a certain level of holiness and is therefore worthy of some special veneration or even hearing human prayers. In the Bible, being a saint or being sanctified always means being separated to God and his work, precisely what Paul said of himself in verse 1 in the words "set apart for the gospel of God." Having been loved by God and called by him, the Christians at Rome, like all Christians, were then also set apart to him, to live for him and work for him in this world.

This is why the faith of the Roman Christians was "being reported all over the world," as Paul says it was in verse 8. Because they had been called by God and were separated to him, these believers were different from the culture around them. And people noticed it!

Do people today notice the difference in those who profess to be Christians? There is no simple answer to this question, because the answer is often relative and because it is *Yes* in one situation and *No* in another. But notice the connective relationship between the terms in these two verses. Robert Haldane speaks of the believers being *loved* by God, *called* by God and being *saints,* saying rightly, "They were saints because they were called, and they were called because they were beloved of God." That is, their being saints was not the cause but the result of their election. Being elect, they were saints; that is, they were separated to God. So, if it is ever the case that one who professes to have been called by God is not actually separated unto him—I do not mean "not perfect" but "not headed in God's direction"—that person is not saved. He or she is no Christian. The one who has been loved and called by God does obey God and does follow after him.

Grace for the Rugged Upward Way

Yet this involves struggle. It requires the grace and peace of God each step of the rugged upward way.

When Paul closes his introduction with the wish that the believers at Rome might experience "grace and peace... from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ," he is not merely passing on a traditional (would we say "hackneyed"?) Christian greeting. He is wishing them what they, and we also, need every day we remain on this planet. We have been saved by grace. We must live by grace also. Just as we live moment by moment by drawing breaths of God's good air, so we must live spiritually moment by moment by drawing on his favor. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5b). A man who is going through a shattering crisis in his business told me just a short time ago, "The only way I get through it is by spending solid blocks of time with God each morning." And he is doing it! What is more, the crisis is deepening his sense of God's presence and strengthening him, rather than doing the opposite.

And peace? We always need peace, for these are not peaceful times. Only fools think them peaceful. These are troublesome times. But those

who are in Christ and are drawing on him for their strength live peacefully in the midst of them.

I close with Paul's own prayer for those great Roman Christians: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." What great gifts these are! How needed! What a wonderful and inexhaustible source of supply!

Chapter 7.
A Reputation Worth Having

Romans 1:8

In the well-known Shakespearean speech "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," the melancholy Lord Jaques speaks of a soldier as one "seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth" (*As You Like It,* Act II, Scene 7). In this speech "reputation" is depicted as worthless, unimportant. How different in *Othello!* Othello, who is also a soldier but who acted foolishly and tragically, says, "I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part, sir, of myself, and what remains is bestial!" (Act II, Scene 3).

How are we to think of reputation? Is it a fragile bubble, or is it immortal? Is it worth having, or is it better for us not even to be concerned with such matters? The answer is that it depends on what we have a reputation for.

In the first chapter of Romans, in a section that is the second, informal introduction to his letter (vv. 8-15), the apostle Paul speaks about a reputation that the Christians at Rome had acquired, and the important point is that he thanks God for it. Their reputation was for faith, and what Paul tells us is that their faith was being spoken about all over the world. This does not mean that every individual in every remote hamlet of the globe had heard of the faith of the Roman Christians, of course, but it does mean that their faith was becoming widely known—no doubt because other Christians were talking about it. "Do you know that

there is a group of believers in Rome?" they were asking. "Have you heard how strong their faith is, how faithfully they are trying to serve Jesus Christ in that wicked city?" Since Paul begins his comment by thanking God for this reputation, it is apparent that however worthless some worldly reputations of some worldly persons may be, this reputation at least was worth having.

Why is a reputation for faith worth having? The text suggests four reasons.

A Genuine Faith

The first reason that the reputation of the Christians at Rome was worth having is that the faith on which it was based was genuine. It was a true faith. This is an important place to begin, because there is much so-called faith that is nonbiblical faith and is therefore a flawed and invalid basis for any reputation.

In some people's minds, faith is thought of chiefly as a *subjective religious feeling,* entirely divorced from God's written revelation. I once talked with a young man who thought of faith in this way. When I had asked him if he was a Christian, he said he was. But as we talked I soon discovered that he did not believe in the deity of Jesus Christ, his bodily resurrection, his sacrificial death for our sin, and many other cardinal Christian doctrines. When I asked the young man how he could reject doctrines central to Christian belief and still call himself a Christian, he replied that he did not know how to answer that question but that nevertheless, deep in his heart, he believed he was a Christian. Clearly this was no true faith. It was only a certain variable outlook on life based on his feelings.

Another substitute for true faith is *credulity.* This is the attitude of people who will accept something as true only because they strongly wish it to be true. Sometimes a faith like this is fixed upon a miraculous cure for some terminal disease, like congenital heart failure, AIDS, or cancer. But credulity does not make a cure happen. Wishful thinking is not genuine faith.

A third false faith is *optimism.* Norman Vincent Peale has popularized this substitute faith through his best-selling book *The Power of Positive Thinking.* He suggests that we collect strong New Testament texts about faith, memorize them, let them sink down into our subconscious, and then recall them and recite them whenever we find faith in ourselves wavering. "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23). "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20). Peale says, "According to your faith in yourself, according to your faith in your job, according to your faith in God, this far will you get and no further."

In this statement, however, faith in yourself, faith in your job, and faith in God are all apparently the same thing, and what this means is that the object of one's faith is irrelevant. John Stott challenges this distortion accurately: "He [Peale] recommends as part of his 'worry-breaking formula' that the first thing every morning before we get up we should say out loud 'I believe' three times, but he does not tell us in what we are so confidently and repeatedly to affirm our belief. The last words of his book are simply 'so believe and live successfully.' But believe *what*? Believe *whom*? To Dr. Peale faith is really another word for self-confidence, for a largely ungrounded optimism." There is some value in a positive outlook on life, of course, just as there is some value in a positive self-image. But this is not the same thing as biblical faith, and it is not the faith for which the apostle Paul thanked God on behalf of the Roman Christians.

Why do I say that the faith of the believers at Rome was a genuine faith in contrast to these other, mistaken views of faith? There are two reasons. First, their faith was in Jesus Christ and in the gospel, which centers in him. Surely this is unmistakable from the context. In the first seven verses of this letter Paul has spoken at length of the gospel, defining it as the gospel "he [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son [Jesus Christ]" and concluding that it had been Paul's task "to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (vv. 2, 3, 5). Then

Paul praises God for the faith of the Roman Christians, and it is evident that it is precisely that kind of faith he has in mind. Their reputation for faith was worth having because theirs was a true faith in Jesus Christ as God's Son and our Savior. As far as salvation is concerned, all other "faiths" are worthless. They will save no one.

Second, this is a faith that God himself brought into being and not something that welled up unaided in the heart of mere human beings. This is why Paul begins by thanking God for these Christians and not by praising them for their commitment. If faith were a human achievement, then Paul should have praised the Roman Christians. He should have said, "First, I thank you for believing in Jesus Christ" or "I praise you for your faith." But Paul does not do this. Faith is worked in us by God as a result of the new birth. Therefore, Paul praises God, not man, for the Roman Christians.

Robert Haldane wrote that in thanking God for the faith of those to whom he is writing "Paul... thus acknowledges God as the author of the Gospel, not only on account of his causing it to be preached to them, but because he had actually given them grace to believe."

Calvin said of this verse, "Faith is a gift of God."

This is the point to ask whether your faith is like that. Not faith in some nebulous subjective experience or something that you are able to work up by yourself, but a faith worked in you by God, as a result of which you have believed on his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as your Savior. If your faith is like that, then yours is a reputation worth having, because it will bring praise to God himself, who is the author of that faith.

A Contagious Faith

The second reason why the reputation for faith that the Christians at Rome had was worth having is that it was a contagious faith. I mean by this that it was a faith not merely heard of and talked about throughout the known world, but that it was also a faith picked up by and communicated to others. Because of this faith, the Roman church grew and the gospel of the Roman congregation spread.

I think this is suggested by verse 17, even though I know the phrase I am referring to can be interpreted in two ways. In Greek the verse contains a repetition of the word *faith* in a phrase that literally reads "from faith to faith" (*ek pisteōs eis pistin*). This can be understood, as the New International Version apparently does understand it, as meaning "by faith from first to last." But it can also mean—and a more literal translation suggests it *does* mean—"from the faith of one who has believed in Christ to another who comes to believe as a result of the first Christian's testimony."

As I say, the phrase "from faith to faith" does not necessarily mean this, since both translations are possible. But I think it does, and whether or not this is the correct meaning, there is no doubt that this is the way the gospel spread in the first Christian centuries, undoubtedly (at least in part) from the strategically located and growing church in the capital city of the Roman empire.

And the church had no modern media at its disposal to "get the message out"! There were no Christian magazines, no inspirational books, no television preachers. How do you suppose these early believers succeeded, as we know they did, without the tools of modern communication? D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has the answer:

A revival never needs to be advertised; it always advertises itself.... Read the history of the church. When revival breaks out in a little group, it does not matter how small, the news spreads and curiosity is awakened and people come and say, 'What is this? Can we partake in this? How can we get hold of this?' Man does not need to advertise it; it becomes known; it spreads throughout the whole world. It had happened here. This is revival! This is Pentecost! This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the news had spread like wildfire in that ancient world with its poor means of communication, and its absence and lack of advertising media. Isn't it time we began to think in New Testament terms?

If we think in New Testament terms, we will be concerned with both the quality of our faith and with its contagious nature. We will be concerned

that people talk about Christianity and inquire after Christ as the result of our lives and those of our fellow believers.

Faith That Encourages Others

There is a third reason why the reputation for faith that the church at Rome had was worth having: it was an encouragement to other believers elsewhere, including even the apostle Paul himself. In verse 12 Paul speaks of this as an anticipated outcome of his proposed trip to Rome: "that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." That expectation was still future. But Paul could look forward to it and speak so confidently of its happening because reports of the Roman Christians' faith had undoubtedly already been a source of encouragement to him.

Did Paul need encouragement? We can be sure he did. Paul was an apostle, of course, a man of great faith. But he is the first to tell us that he was often adversely afflicted by the trials and burdens of his work. In 1 Corinthians he admits that when he came to Corinth it was "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). In his second letter to Corinth he writes, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Yet he concludes, "All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God" (v. 15). Later in the same book, after a lengthy passage listing the many persecutions, hardships, and dangers he endured as Christ's ambassador, he concludes, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28).

Everyone needs encouragement, particularly those who are engaged in spiritual warfare against Satan. But what is to encourage them? God, of course. But God also works through human instruments, and one great means of God's encouraging Christian workers is the report of genuine, growing faith on the part of others elsewhere.

This is an encouragement to me. Is it not an encouragement to you?

Doesn't your heart respond thankfully when you hear of thriving churches in formerly Communist nations such as Romania, even when believers there have been harassed and sometimes beaten by the civil authorities? Doesn't your spirit rise when you hear of the courageous stand against apartheid by many believers in South Africa?

Isn't your load made lighter when you are told of those in high levels of our own government, in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, who regularly meet for prayer and Bible study, asking God to lead them as they seek to direct the affairs of the United States of America?

Aren't you also encouraged by the reports of those who are working for Christ in the tough neighborhoods of our cities?

Don't you rejoice when you hear of even one person who has become a Christian?

Let me interject this additional thought. The thing that distinguishes Paul's words to the believers in Rome from what he says elsewhere—to believers in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi or some other city he had visited—is that he had not founded the church in Rome. Although he was planning to visit Rome and be encouraged by a mutual sharing of faith with the Roman
Christians, up to this point he had not done so, and I would suppose that for that reason alone he was especially encouraged.

Let me speak personally. I am encouraged when some message or word of mine is used by God to bring another person to faith in Christ, as often happens. I am encouraged when something I do for Christ prospers. But notice: I am especially encouraged, doubly heartened, when the blessing of God occurs elsewhere as the result of someone else's work. Why? Because it means that I am not alone in the work. It means that there are other soldiers in this spiritual warfare and that victory is in the strong hands of our one true commander. I am sure this was true for the apostle Paul and that it was one reason why he thought so buoyantly of the Roman Christians. In hard times it must have

cheered him just to know of these Christians and to be aware that their faith was being spoken of "all over the world."

Faith: The Central Item

The last reason why the reputation of the Christians at Rome was worth having is that faith, and not some other attainment or virtue, is *the* essential item in life. Faith in Jesus Christ is what matters. Knowledge is good; Christianity considers knowledge quite important. Good works are necessary; without them we have no valid reason for believing that an individual is saved. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23)—is what we want to see. But faith alone—faith in Christ as Lord and Savior—is essential. For "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6a). Without faith no one can be justified.

I wonder if we have the spirit of the apostle at this point. Is this the way we actually evaluate other Christian works and testimony?

Here is what I think we do. I think we evaluate other works first on the basis of size. When we hear of a church that has ten thousand members, we are ten times more impressed than if we learn of a church that has only a thousand members. What of a church with a congregation of ten? Let me be clear. I am not against large churches. I am glad for them. I have often said that large churches can do things smaller churches cannot do—launch specialized Christian ministries, for example, or have prospering subgroups that focus on the specific concerns of only some members. Moreover, large churches are often the result of a strong expository ministry, as are some of the largest churches in Southern California, or of strong faith and piety on the part of their members, like the exceedingly large Korean churches. But we must not think, just because the blessing of numbers is good, that a small church is therefore not as favored by God or is not bearing as faithful or strong a testimony. What about the house churches in China, for example? Or the struggling church in North Africa? We may thank God for

numerical growth, but what we should be especially thankful for is strong faith.

Is that what we modern Christians are known for? Strong faith? Is our faith, like the faith of the Roman church of Paul's day, spoken of throughout the world?

Another thing we do is evaluate Christian work on the basis of programs. The more the better!
Or, the more original the better, particularly if the people involved can write a book about it! Again, I am not against programs. Right programs are for the sake of people and rightly minister to them. But is this the proper way to evaluate churches? Do programs prove God's blessing? You know the answer to that. I do not think the fledgling, first-century church at Rome had many programs, certainly not the kind of things we mean by programs. But it was a famous church— and rightly so. For it was known for what was essential, which is faith.

Is that what we are known for? Do people say of us, "How strong is their faith in God and in Jesus Christ"?

I think we are also impressed—perhaps we are most to be pitied here—by big budgets and big buildings. Again, I am not against either budgets or buildings. Without adequate financing many worthwhile Christian works cannot be done, and without adequate meeting spaces much important activity is hindered. Even in countries like Romania, a chief concern of the thriving Christian congregations has been the repeated attempts of the Communist government to destroy the church structures. Still, a proper concern for budgets and buildings is quite different from evaluating a work on the basis of how large the budget is or how spacious and modern the church structure has become. The Roman church of Paul's day probably just met in people's houses. Yet it was a church whose faith was known throughout the world.

Are we known for that? Or is the best thing that other Christians can say about us is that we have a seven-figure budget or impressive church structures?

Faith really is the essential thing, not numbers or programs, not budgets or buildings. It is by faith that we "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). The apostle John said, "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

I will tell you the kind of reputation I pray we might have at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. I pray that Tenth Presbyterian might be known as a church where people believe what God has told us in the Bible and then actually try to live by what they find there. I want Tenth to be a church known for strong faith in Jesus Christ, where people speak often, lovingly, and fearlessly of him. I want our church to be known for faith where God has placed us, not in some theoretical time or setting, but in the city of Philadelphia, demonstrating that Jesus is the answer to the city's problems and the problems of those who live here. I want Tenth to be rock hard in faith, in adversity as well as in prosperity, when praised as well as when persecuted.

Is that too much to ask? I think not. I think that is a reasonable goal and a reputation worth having.

Chapter 8.
Prayed for Constantly

Romans 1:9-12

About the time I was beginning to prepare for these studies in Romans, I was asked to speak at an anniversary service in a nearby church, and I was given the title: "Passing On the Reformation from Generation to Generation." It was a topic I had never addressed before, and I was not sure how to tackle it. As I thought about the matter, God led me to two sentences, one from the end of the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke and the other from the second chapter of Acts. The first is about Jesus. It says, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). The second is about the early Christian church.

It says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people..." (Acts 2:46b-47).

What struck me about those two sentences is the word *favor,* for it is an insight into how Christianity must be passed on. Our word for it is "modeling." Jesus so modeled faith that those who looked to him saw he was genuine and therefore favored him and followed him. It was the same with the early church. The early Christians so modeled their profession that those who looked on were attracted to them. We are not surprised to read, immediately after the sentence in Acts 2, that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (v. 47b).

That is the way God trains ministers. They see ministry modeled by some other minister before them, and they copy that example.

That is the way God makes evangelists. They learn from others who are already in the work.

That is the way God develops churches. One church models an effective ministry, and other churches learn from it and do the same things themselves.

I begin this way because our subject here is prayer, and the most significant thing to note about it is that our text is a prayer model. Yet this is not a treatise on prayer. It is not a "how-to" for an effective prayer ministry. Rather, it is a glimpse into the apostle Paul's own prayer life—into his pattern of prayer for Christians in the growing church at Rome—and is therefore a model for us as we think about our own prayer patterns, or lack of them.

Work and Pray

There are a number of things I want you to see about this passage, and the first is this: *A strong prayer life is not the least bit inconsistent with vigorous and fervent service for the Lord.*

It should be unnecessary to say this, of course, but we often divorce the two in our thinking.

Some are called to pray, we reason. Some are called to work. When we think of what we call "prayer warriors," we often picture old ladies who are strong in faith but unable to "do" much, or we think of people who are hospitalized or bedridden and who can therefore "only" pray. I do not want to be misunderstood at this point, of course. So let me acknowledge that some people are given a special ministry of prayer, perhaps because of precisely these circumstances. Moreover, if you are bedridden or otherwise unable to be outwardly active in Christ's service, I encourage you to spend much prayer time for others. Many who are incapacitated pray for me. I think of a woman named Cherrio Gridley who was crippled through an industrial accident years ago. She listens to The Bible Study Hour and prays regularly for me and my family, the church, and our ministry. Prayer warriors are needed. But this does not mean that those who are active in Christian work (or any kind of work) do not also need to be strong in praying for God's direction and blessing.

Here is where the example of Paul is so helpful. We know of his life from the account of it in Acts, and we have additional insights from what Paul says about himself in his letters. We know that he was a pioneer missionary, taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to places it had not previously been known. In doing this he covered much of the Roman world.

His labors stretched from Syria to Rome.

He crossed deserts and traversed mountain passes.

He traveled by foot and by sea.

He was frequently beaten, once stoned, often imprisoned.

He was shipwrecked.

Everywhere Paul established churches, and after he had established them he constantly kept in touch with the believers, helping them work

through their problems. In one place he speaks of the "daily pressure" of his concern for them.

No harried pastor has ever been more pressed for time than Paul.

No busy executive ever carried a greater burden of responsibility.

Yet Paul was a model of a strong and consistent prayer ministry. In our text he says that he remembered the church at Rome—only one of the many churches of a growing Christian movement, and one he had not even visited—"constantly" and "at all times." Do you think Paul was exaggerating? I do not think he was exaggerating at all. I think he really did pray all the time, just as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and other effective Christian workers did. Luther once said that he had so much to do in a day that he could not get through it without spending at least three or four hours on his knees before God each morning.

Prayer is not inconsistent with fervent service. On the contrary, as Robert Haldane said, "Prayer and labor ought to go together. To pray without laboring is to mock God; to labor without prayer is to rob God of his glory. Until these are conjoined, the gospel will not be extensively successful."

Prayer and God-Directed Service

So we see from Paul's example, as well as from the lives of others, that prayer is not the least bit inconsistent with vigorous Christian activity. On the contrary, and this is the second point:

Prayer directs Christian service properly.

Again the apostle Paul is our model. We can think of examples of people who are engaged in Christian work but who do not seem to be going about it in the right way. Either they use the world's methods, which produce only the world's results. Or else their goals seem to be secular rather than truly Christian. As we read what Paul says about his prayer life in this chapter, we see that this was not the case with him. He

prayed about his work, and as a result God directed it to be done in a spiritual way and for spiritual ends. He says several things about it.

1. *Paul's service was sincere, or wholehearted.* The older versions of verse 9 say, "whom I serve with my spirit," a literal rendering of the Greek. But the New International Version is surely correct when it paraphrases the text to read, "whom I serve with my whole heart." The point is not that Paul served God by means of or by using his spirit, though one of our modern versions paraphrases the text in this way: "to whom I offer the humble service of my spirit" (NEB). It is rather that Paul served God from the depth of his being—wholeheartedly. What a valid point that is! Not all who profess to serve Christ serve him wholeheartedly. Many are lazy in their service. Many are trying to please other people rather than the Lord. Paul knew of people like this himself. He called them "detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good" (Titus 1:16b). But he was not like them.

What kept Paul from falling into these traps? Clearly it was his relationship to God, sustained by consistent and fervent prayer. As he sought God in prayer, God enabled him to serve the Lord Jesus Christ wholeheartedly.

2. *Paul's service was gospel-centered.* This is the second thing Paul says about his service. It was carried out by his "preaching the gospel of his [God's] Son" (v. 9). We know about the gospel, of course. We know that it is our task to make the gospel known. But it is surprising how many other things squeeze in as a substitute for this one essential thing, and as a result our service is not gospel-centered. We do not mean to let this happen. Other agendas are usually seen as ways to get the gospel out or to make it known, at least at first. But they take on a character and schedule of their own, and they become ends in themselves. What can keep us from this deviation? The answer is prayer. Prayer focuses our attention on God and his gospel, which was clearly Paul's case, as is evident in the opening verses of this letter.

It is this more than anything else that I have found prayer to do for me personally. It has redirected my focus so that I have begun to see things in God's perspective. When that has happened, some of the things in my life that have been most distressing have faded in importance.

3. *Paul's service was for others.* This is the point most evident in Paul's prayer for the Roman Christians, for he is saying that he had been praying to be with them in order that he might be a blessing in their lives. There is a sequence of three important ideas here, and it begins with prayer. First, Paul prayed that he might be permitted to see the Roman Christians. Second, he prayed that he might see them in order to impart a spiritual blessing to them. Third, he prayed that he might see them and impart a spiritual blessing to them so that they might be strengthened in their Christianity. How did Paul propose to do that? The answer is clear. It was by preaching the gospel to them with his whole heart, just as he had preached it to other people.

We need to see the importance of prayer here also, and the best way to see it is to realize that
Christians frequently lose the desire to serve others. They lose it in different ways. Criticism will lessen our zeal for service. It is much harder to serve those who criticize us than to serve those who praise and think well of us. Fatigue will lessen it. We grow too tired to serve and thus inevitably think more of ourselves than other persons. Sin also destroys our desire to serve others. This is because sin breaks contact with God, who is the source of right motivation and desire, and because it focuses attention on ourselves. Sin is really self-centeredness rather than other-centeredness. These and other factors turn us from what we are to be as Christ's representatives.

What will keep us on target? The one thing that will keep us from falling to these temptations is prayer. Prayer will overcome an undue oppression from criticism. Prayer will redirect our energies, so we will not be so tired. Prayer will strengthen us for doing what needs to be done in spite of our tiredness. Prayer will keep us from temptation.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged:
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness: Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge:
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield thee. Thou wilt find a solace there.

Joseph Scriven, 1855

Powerful and Effective Prayer

The third point of this passage is that prayer makes the service of the praying one effective.

A perceptive student may observe at this point that Paul had been praying to visit Rome, and yet, however noble that request may have been, obviously he had not received a favorable answer. Paul was far from Rome. He had not been able to visit the believers in Rome even though he "longed" to see them (v. 11) and had "planned many times to come" (v. 13). At this point he was not even on his way to Rome. Well and good! Our prayers are often the same. But if this is the case, how can we honestly talk about prayer being powerful or about prayer making the service of the praying one effective? There are a number of things to notice.

First, to come to Rome to serve the believers there personally was not the only thing Paul had been praying about. Indeed, what he says is that (1) he remembered them in his prayers at all times; and (2) he prayed that now at last the way might be opened for him to come to them. When he remembered them in his prayers at all times, what do you suppose Paul prayed for as regarding the Roman church? Certainly it was not only that he might have a safe journey to them. Most of his

prayers probably had little to do with that. Rather, Paul would have prayed for their maturity in faith, for their safety against Satan's wiles and onslaughts, for their ability to bear an effective witness in the great capital of the empire, with its many perversions and vices. Were these prayers answered? We know they were, because Paul tells us that the faith of the Roman church was being reported all over the world.

If you are praying for someone, do not think your prayers are ineffective just because God is not using *you* to fulfill the request. God has infinite means at his disposal. He may be answering your prayers by others' service.

Second, when Paul prayed that the way might be opened for him to come to Rome, he prayed, as he tells us, that the door might be opened "by God's will" (v. 10). That is, Paul was praying first that the will of God might be done and only secondly that he might come to Rome. He wanted to come to Rome only if that was in God's plan for his life. Do we need proof of this? The proof is in the way Paul graciously submitted to what hindered his plans. We must remember that Paul was a very forceful man and that when he made plans he undoubtedly did everything in his power to stick to them. Moreover, the proposed trip to Rome was no passing fancy on Paul's part. Already we catch a glimpse of how seriously he took it. But in case we miss the point, we find him bringing it up again in chapter 15, saying in several places that his heart had been set on traveling to Rome and then, after being helped on his way by the Roman church, passing on to Spain to preach the Word of God there. Undoubtedly Paul wanted to preach the gospel from one end of the Roman world to the other, from Jerusalem to Tarshish. Nevertheless, when he was hindered in his plans, we do not catch any trace of agitation or frustration on his part. On the contrary, he graciously submitted to God's will for his life and recognized that there was value even in delays. If nothing else, delays gave him additional time to preach the gospel to those in Greece and Asia.

Third—we can hardly miss this—Paul did get to Rome eventually. It was not when he would have chosen, and it certainly was not in the manner he would have chosen. But he *did* get there, and God *did* use

him to reach many in the capital. In Philippians he tells us that while he was in prison the gospel spread throughout the Praetorian guard. And we know from other sources that eventually the message of the cross reached even the highest levels of the government. Were Paul's prayers answered? Of course, they were. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16b, KJV).

Does Prayer Change Things—Or People?

There is one last thing I want you to see in this section. Not only is prayer not inconsistent with a life of active service for Jesus Christ, and not only (on the contrary) does it direct that service and make it effective—*Prayer also changes the one praying so that he or she increasingly becomes the kind of person through whom God can accomplish his purpose.*

This was true of Paul. By temperament he was not a particularly gracious individual—at least, that is how it seems to me. In his early days he was cruel. He killed those who disagreed with him. Even after he became a Christian I am sure he had his bad moments. He quarreled with Barnabas over John Mark, for instance. Yet how gracious he is in this letter! Paul writes of his desire to visit Rome "so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (v. 11). But no sooner has he said this than Paul, not desiring to set himself up above the believers at
Rome as if he were somehow superior to them, immediately adds as an important qualification, "that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 12). That is an insight into the life of a man who had been changed by prayer and who was being used by God greatly.

Sometimes people ask, "Does prayer change things, or does prayer change people?" It is a good question, and the answer probably is "both." Prayer does change things, since God responds to prayer and frequently alters circumstances because of it. James points to this result

when he says, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2b).

On the other hand, I am convinced that far more frequently God uses prayer to change *us.* Because by it he brings us into his presence, opens our eyes to spiritual realities, and makes his perspectives ours.

In Ray C. Stedman's book *Talking to My Father,* the well-known pastor of the Peninsula Bible
Church of Palo Alto, California, tells the story of a missionary couple who were returning to the
United States by ship after a lifetime of service in Africa. It was during the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt, and Roosevelt, as it happened, was sailing on the same ship. He had been game hunting in Africa, and when he came aboard there was a tremendous fanfare. Bands played.
Dignitaries appeared. Crowds of people stationed themselves to see and greet the president. When the ship arrived in America it was more of the same thing. Roosevelt was applauded, and many of the important people of the government came out to welcome him.

Nobody paid any attention to the missionary couple, and it greatly depressed the old man. The two were broken in health. They had no pension; no one had much in those days. They had nowhere to go. They were afraid. "It's not fair," he said to his wife. "We have served God all these years, and when we come home there is not even a single person here to welcome us. We have no money. We have nowhere to go. If God is running the world, why does he permit such injustice?"

His wife said, "You had better go into the bedroom and talk to God about it."

The missionary did, and when he came out a while later a great change had come over him. His wife said, "You feel better now, don't you, dear?"

"Yes," he said. "I began to pray and tell God how unjust the whole thing was. I told him how bitter I was that the president should receive a grand welcome and that we should receive nothing. There was not even

a single person to welcome us home. But when I finished, it seemed as if the Lord just placed his hand on my shoulder and said in a quiet voice, 'But you're not home yet.' "

That is quite true, of course. That is the true perspective on what we are doing. But we will see it and live it only as we commune with God in prayer and learn to trust him and look forward to our homecoming.

Chapter 9.
Unanswered Prayer

Romans 1:13

There are very few churchgoers who have not heard the story of the little boy who was praying for a bicycle for Christmas. His was a poor family, so when Christmas morning came there was no bicycle. A friend of the family, who was not too sensitive about such things, said to the lad, "Well, I see God didn't answer your prayer for a bicycle."

The boy replied, "Yes, he did; he said No."

Most of us are aware that No is an answer every bit as much as Yes. But I have always felt that the story of the little boy's prayer does not quite get to the heart of the prayer problem. To receive a bicycle might be nice, but it is clearly not essential. Nor is it spiritual. Most of us understand that when we pray for things like bicycles—a better job, more money, success in a business deal, or the resolution of certain personal problems—there is no real reason why we should expect a Yes answer. God may give what we ask for, but again he may not. We accept that. But what about prayers that really are spiritual? What about prayers that are (or at least seem to be) unselfish? What happens when these prayers are not answered? This is where the real problem with prayer lies and why the people who have trouble with it are not the novices in prayer, as we might suspect—novices do not expect much from prayer anyway—but rather the church's mature believers. It is the

saints who feel the burden of unanswered prayer. It is the godly who wrestle with it strenuously.

So what happens? Unfortunately, some persons become somewhat fatalistic about prayer. J. Oswald Sanders pointed to this problem when he wrote, "It is easy to become a fatalist in reference to prayer. It is easier to regard unanswered prayer as the will of God than to... reason out the causes of the defeat."

Prayer of an Apostle

In the case of Paul's prayer, recounted in Romans 1, we have a superb example of precisely this problem. Why is it such a good example?

First, it is a prayer by an apostle. The fact that Paul was an apostle does not mean that he was without sin, of course. Nor does it mean that all Paul's prayers were spiritual. Paul did not pray by inspiration, the way he wrote his epistles. In fact, I believe that there is an example of his praying out of the will of God in his prayers to visit Jerusalem with the gifts of the Gentile churches, which Luke tells us about in Acts. God warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and even after he went the Lord appeared to him to say, "Leave Jerusalem immediately..." (Acts 22:18). Yet Paul did not leave and was eventually imprisoned.

Paul was not without sin as an apostle. Yet he was an apostle, and that says something. It is significant that such a one did not have his prayers answered positively, or at least at once.

Second, Paul's prayer was a proper prayer. I wrote in the previous study that Romans 1:8-12 is not a treatise on prayer in the sense of providing a theological explanation of prayer. It is a prayer model, an example. Still, it is a proper prayer. It is *to the Father* on the basis of *the atoning work of Jesus Christ* and, although Paul does not say so explicitly, it was undoubtedly also *in the Holy Spirit.* Paul puts all three persons of the Godhead together in reference to prayer in one sentence in Ephesians 2:18: "For through him [that is, Jesus Christ] we both [that is, Jews and Gentiles] have access to the Father by one Spirit."

There is one more important thing to see about this prayer, the third item: It was a prayer for right things. Paul might have prayed for something that would only have enhanced his prestige or personal comfort; that is, he might have prayed selfishly. But that was not the case here at all. Paul was praying to come to Rome in order that (1) he might "impart some spiritual gift" to the end that (2) the believers in Rome might be made "strong" (v. 11). In other words, he wanted to assist in the spiritual growth and fruitfulness of the Roman believers.

This was an entirely worthy and quite spiritual motive. Yet, as I have said, Paul was prevented from coming. His prayer was not answered positively.

Paul does not give an explanation of why his proposed visit to Rome was hindered, at least not here. He only says, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles." I do not doubt that Paul could have suggested a reason why his prayers were unanswered, perhaps a number of reasons. But he does not, and the fact that he does not opens the door for us to reflect on why prayers like his — including the best of our own prayers—go unanswered.

Not As Necessary As We Think

I want to suggest a number of reasons why perfectly proper prayers may go unanswered and what we may learn from this. The first is: Unanswered prayer may be God's way of teaching that we are not as necessary to the work we are praying for as we think we are. That is so important it is worth saying again. *Unanswered prayer may be God's way of teaching that we are not as necessary to the work we are praying for as we think we are.*

This is clear in Paul's case, is it not? Paul had been praying that he might be permitted to travel to Rome to serve and strengthen the Roman Christians. But noble as this desire may have been, it is also clear that the believers in Rome were doing quite well without him. Indeed, they

were doing well without any apostle or noteworthy teacher. Paul testifies to this when he records that their strong faith was being reported on all over the world (v. 8). I do not want to be misunderstood at this point, of course. I have no doubt that if Paul had been allowed to go to Rome, he would have been a blessing to the Christians. Moreover, they apparently did need his teaching, since God directed him to write them the letter we are studying. We, too, need pastors, teachers, and other church leaders. The point is not that Paul could not have been then or eventually a blessing to these Christians, but only that he was not essential to it. God was perfectly able to bless and prosper this church without Paul's personal ministrations.

I do not say that this is something Paul himself necessarily learned by God's refusal to send him to Rome, though it may have been. But it is certainly something we frequently need to learn. I say this because, as I suspect, most of our good prayers—not our selfish or ignorant or carnal prayers, but our good prayers—have ourselves at the center and assume that, if God is to answer them, he must do so through us as his agents.

One thing unanswered prayer may do for us is teach us to pray for blessing on God's work through other people. Years ago, at a management training session for the Servicemaster company, I was taught that good management is "getting the right things done through other people." That is not a bad definition for some prayers. It is at least something we need to practice more frequently.

The great pioneer missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, learned this function of prayer early in his ministry. He had taken literally the verse "owe no man any thing" (Rom. 13:8 KJV) and believed that Christians should never incur debt, even in Christian work. So, when a financial need occurred, he prayed for God to meet it, a lesson he had learned from George Mueller, the founder of the faith orphanages in England. Not long after Taylor had been in China he was moved to pray for two missionaries for each of China's eleven provinces plus Mongolia, twentyfour in all. He had no means of supporting them, so he had to pray for sufficient funds as well. There was not even a society to send them out. But Taylor prayed for this, and God answered— first with the

original twenty-four missionaries, then with the thousands who later went to China under the auspices of the China Inland Mission. The growth of the China Inland Mission in those days is a great story.

Was Taylor necessary for this work? Yes, in a way. His prayers were necessary. But he was not the means of conveying the blessing of God to these many provinces of China personally.

Other Things to Do

The second reason why perfectly proper prayers of ours may be unanswered is that *God may have other work for us to do.* This seems to have been the chief (perhaps the only) reason why God did not send the great apostle to Rome earlier. In the fifteenth chapter of Romans, Paul speaks of his ministry among the remote cities of the Gentiles as a fulfillment of Isaiah 52:15— "Those who were not told about him [that is, Jesus] will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Then he adds, somewhat unexpectedly, "This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you" (v. 22). It was his ministry among the people of Asia and Greece that had kept him from the Roman Christians, and that is why he did not chafe under the hindrances God sent. He recognized that delay in reaching Rome was for the sake of the Christian mission elsewhere. We need to learn this, too, and be content through learning it. Let me give some examples.

Here is a man who is in an unrewarding job and who would very much prefer another line of work. He tells the Lord that he is not being fulfilled in his present employment, that he is not using the gifts he believes God has given him, that he is not getting ahead, that he is accomplishing little. Each of those points may be true. The work may be unusually frustrating. But God does not give him a new job. Why? We cannot say why for certain, but it may be that God still has work for this man in the job he has, even though he cannot see it or believe it is happening. There may be another worker to help. There may be a moral issue to be faced. There may be a person who needs to hear the gospel and be led to Jesus Christ.

Here is a woman who is not married but who wants to be. She tells God that she would be much happier married, that she is not really interested in pursuing a career (though many other women are), that she does not want to grow old alone. Those are perfectly valid desires. Still, God does not answer her prayers positively. Why? It may be that God simply has work for her to do as a single person. He may need her as a single Christian executive, nurse, teacher, businesswoman, secretary, or whatever.

If you are praying for something and God is not answering your request with a Yes, ask what you can accomplish in the meantime and give yourself to that. It does not mean that God may not give you what you are asking for eventually, but in the meantime you will be doing good work.

Spiritual Warfare

The third reason why our prayers may go unanswered for a time is the hardest to understand: *There may be spiritual warfare of which you and I are unaware.* There are examples of this in Scripture. Paul spoke of "a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Cor. 12:7), saying that he prayed three times for it to be removed but that God had replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). A second example is Daniel, who prayed for something but did not receive an answer to his prayer for three weeks. When at last he did receive an answer, the angel who brought it explained that when Daniel had begun to pray he had started out with God's answer but that he had been resisted by a spiritual being called "the prince of the Persian kingdom." He was able to come through eventually only because the archangel Michael helped him (Dan. 10:1-14).

Spiritual battles are mysteries to us, because we cannot see the warfare. But there *are* spiritual battles, and we need to know about them. They are an important reason why some of our prayers go unanswered.

Does Prayer Change People?

In the previous study I asked the question, "Does prayer change things or change people?" I answered, "Both." Prayer changes things (or circumstances) because it is a God-ordained way of changing them. I based my view on James 4:2, which says, "You do not have, because you do not ask God." If prayer does not change things, then many of the promises that concern it are at best misrepresentations. Jacques Ellul is quite right, though very bold, when he says, "It is prayer, and prayer alone, which can make history.... To pray is to carry oneself toward the future. It is both to expect it as possible, and to will it as history."

But prayer also (perhaps chiefly) changes people, as I pointed out.

I want to return to that point now, because, in addition to all I have said so far, one important reason for God not answering prayer is deficiency in us. And so, prayer needs to change us *before* it changes circumstances. What are our deficiencies? What needs changing in us?

1. *Unconfessed sin.* There are more verses in the Bible saying that God will *not* answer prayers than there are verses that say he will, and one of the chief categories of verses that deal with unanswered prayer concerns sin. Isaiah wrote, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2). If God is not answering your prayers—particularly if he is not answering any of them—one thing you should do is ask whether you are cherishing some sin. If so, you need to confess it for full forgiveness and cleansing.

2. *Wrong motives.* James spoke of this when he said, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). Can a person pray for even spiritual things wrongly? Yes, of course. A woman may pray for the conversion of her husband, but with wrong motives—not for his good, that he may be saved from hell

and enjoy fellowship with God in this life—but because it would be much more pleasant for her to have a Christian husband or because other Christians would think better of her.

A pastor may pray with wrong motives—for revival, for instance. How? By praying not chiefly so that people may be saved, but that his church might begin to grow and other pastors might look up to him as an effective teacher and evangelist. In *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power,* R. A. Torrey tells of one minister who was praying for revival so he would not lose his church, and of another who was praying to be baptized with the Holy Spirit because he thought he would be paid more if he was.

If we are praying with wrong motives, we need to be changed by God through prayer so we might pray properly.

3. *Laziness.* It is said of Elijah that he prayed "earnestly" that it would not rain and that it did not rain for three and a half years (James 5:17). Prayer was a serious business with him. One reason our prayers are not answered is that we are not really serious about them.

4. *We are too busy.* Sometimes we are too busy to pray "earnestly." But, as someone has said, "If we are too busy to pray, we are too busy." Each of us has exactly the same amount of time in a day as every other person. If we say we are too busy to pray, what we are really saying is that we consider the things we are doing to be more important than praying. This is a theological misunderstanding.

5. *Idols in the heart.* Some of the elders of Israel once came to Ezekiel to pray with him. But the Lord said to Ezekiel, "These men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?" (Ezek. 14:3). Is an idol keeping you from having your prayers answered? Is that idol a person? A boyfriend? A girlfriend? A wife? A husband? Your children? Is it your job? Is it your lifestyle? Your

social position? Your worldly reputation? Is it your image of yourself? Are you determined above all else to be "successful"? To place anything ahead of God is idolatry. It is a categorical prayer hindrance.

6. *Stinginess in our giving.* Proverbs 21:13 says, "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." In other words, if you do not give to the needy, God will not give to you when you ask him for something. Or again, Jesus says, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38). This is quite clear. Torrey writes, "Here God distinctly tells us that he measures out his benefactions to us in exactly the same measure that we measure out our benefactions to others. And some of us use such [tiny] pint cup measures in our giving that God can only give us a pint cup blessing." The spiritual life of many Christians can be written in just this one word: stinginess. They began with generous hearts, recognizing that God had been generous to them in salvation. But then they became critical of what God was doing in their lives, or critical of other believers or of the way things were being done in their church—and their generosity dried up. They kept their money for themselves. And God stopped giving! Their abundance leveled off. They plateaued because they could not be trusted with more assets.

7. *Unbelief.* The greatest cause of failure in our prayer, and the area in which we most need to be changed, is unbelief. James told those of his day to "believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord..." (James 1:6-7). If we do not believe God's Word unquestioningly, why should we get what we pray for? Is it a surprise that our prayers are unanswered?

Pray and Do Not Give Up

I close with a hypothetical situation. Here you are, someone who has been praying earnestly for something for a long time and has not had an answer. As we have seen, there are numerous reasons why a positive answer may have been delayed, all the way from spiritual warfare in the heavenlies to our sin or unbelief. What are you to do? Should you keep on battering the brass doors of heaven with ineffectual petitions? Or should you accept God's rejection? Should you quit praying?

The answer is in Jesus' parable of the importunate widow, which, Luke tells us, teaches that we "should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Prayer may change us. It may change history. But whatever the case, we must keep praying.

Paul kept praying, and he got to Rome eventually.

George Mueller kept praying, too. When Mueller was a young man he had three friends who were not Christians. He began to pray for them. He prayed every day for more than sixty years. It seemed as if his prayers would never be answered. But they were. Two of those men were converted shortly before Mueller's death, one at what was probably the last service Mueller held. The other was converted within a year of Mueller's funeral. Unanswered prayer? How do we ever know it will remain unanswered? Since we do not, we ought always to pray and not give up.

Chapter 10.
The Whole Gospel for the Whole World

Romans 1:14-15

The title of this chapter has two parts: (1) the whole gospel, and (2) the whole world, but I am going to spend most of it on the second part. The reason is that "the whole world," rather than "the whole gospel," is the new idea at this point in the exposition. As far as the gospel goes, we have already learned a great deal about it in the opening verses of Paul's

letter, and we will learn more as our study proceeds. Indeed, the letter of Paul to the Romans is the best treatment of "the whole gospel" in all Scripture. The point I want to emphasize in this study is that this full-orbed gospel is for everybody.

Our text expresses it from the perspective of Paul's personal experience: "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."

Actually, the gospel has always been for everybody. Thom Hopler in his excellent book on cross-cultural evangelism, *A World of Difference: Following Christ Beyond Your Cultural Walls,* shows this from the Bible as a whole. As early as Genesis 3, we see that the gospel is for both male and female, the first announcement of the gospel being made both to Adam and to Eve (Gen. 3:15). In Daniel we find that it is for the dreaded Babylonians as well as for the persecuted Jews. In the ministry of Jesus Christ the gospel was taught to "publicans and sinners" as well as to those who had the privileges of education and high birth, like Nicodemus. It was disclosed to the Samaritan woman of John 4. Later, at the time of the expanding apostolic ministry, God reminded Peter that the gospel was for Roman military officers, like Cornelius, as well as for those who, like the Jews, were ceremonially "clean." On that occasion Peter made the point by declaring, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him" (Acts 10:34-35). Jesus showed the geographical scope of the gospel's proclamation in Acts' version of the Great Commission: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

How easily we forget this! Christians forget, or at least willfully ignore, that the gospel is for people other than themselves. Unbelievers argue, as an excuse, that the gospel is for other types of people.

To Wise People Everywhere

In Romans 1:14 the first persons to whom Paul says he is obligated as an ambassador of the gospel are Greeks, whom he contrasts with "non-Greeks" or, as some of our more literal versions say, "barbarians."

There is a second contrast in this sentence, "the wise" and the "foolish" (or "unwise"), which indicates how the first category is to be understood. If Paul had contrasted Greeks with Romans—which he could have done, since he was writing to Romans, we would have to understand the distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks in terms of nationality. If he had let the comparison end with "Greeks" and "non-Greeks," not mentioning "wise" and "unwise," the distinction would have been primarily an ethnic one. However, Paul adds the words *wise* and *foolish,* and by doing this he shows that what he is chiefly thinking of is culture or education. Because of their language, long-established Greeks had access to the great historical, epic, dramatic and, above all, philosophical writings of the past. Even the powerful Romans got the bulk of their education through this channel. Apart from the Greek language, others—people of all kinds—could never be considered learned or wise by Greek standards.

So Paul's first claim is that the gospel God sent him to proclaim is for the learned of this world. It is for the wise, whether they are Greeks or Romans or Americans or even the elite among university professors.

The gospel is for you if you are among the educated of our world. You need this ancient
Christian gospel. Whatever your educational attainments, however wise you may be, you are still a sinful man or woman and are cut off from the God who made you and to whom you must one day give account for your many sins. You are mortal. One day you will die. You will enter eternity with or without the Lord Jesus Christ—just as surely as any other man or woman.

I know the evasions you might make, because I have been to the same schools and have taken the same courses. I have heard the arguments. You can say, "I was taught in my sociology courses that religions are all relative. They are to be understood by the cultural forces that give them

birth. You are a Christian only because you have been born in the West and are the product of an historical stream descending from the Reformation. If you had been born elsewhere, you might as well have been a Buddhist or a Muslim." That is quite true, of course; at least the last part of it is true. But the issue is not where you or I have been privileged (or not privileged) to be born, but whether there is a God and whether or not he is as Christianity presents him. If there is a God, he obviously has some character. He is not everything and nothing all at the same time. Is he the Bible's God? Did God send his Son Jesus Christ to bring us salvation? You cannot escape those questions by mere sociological comparisons.

The Greeks tried to do that even in Paul's day. When he traveled to Athens, the intellectual capital of the world, and spoke of Jesus Christ there, the Greek intellectuals were politely amused by this religious novelty. They thought Paul a proclaimer of "foreign gods." None of this daunted Paul, however. He proclaimed the true God anyway. "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you," he said (Acts 17:23). He finished his address by speaking of the final judgment and commanding his listeners to repent of their sins.

So also must you.

Perhaps you have another method by which you are trying to evade the gospel's implications. You consider the details of Christianity to be magical or absurd and therefore easy to reject, just as some of the Athenians did. "Who can believe in miracles today?" you protest. "No intelligent person can believe in divine-human beings, people walking on water, resurrections, and such things. We have to reject those old superstitions."

But intelligent people *do* believe these things. They do today, and they always have. What is more, they are convinced that it is those who reject the supernatural who are really the unintelligent.

Let me echo one other "educated" objection. There are people who have taken religion courses in college or graduate school and who now know

enough to turn a rather superficial knowledge of biblical studies against the Bible itself. They can speak of "Pauline" verses and "Petrine" theology. They can speak of first and second Isaiah. They think, just because they have a slight acquaintance with such things, that they can sit in judgment on the Bible rather than having it the other way around. "After all, Paul was just a male chauvinist," they say. Or, "If Moses lived when the Bible says he lived, he couldn't even have known how to write—least of all have given us the Pentateuch."

These critical theories have been answered well by conservative, believing scholars, some quite conclusively. Besides, if you honestly want to learn about Christianity, why go to an unbelieving professor to learn about it? Is that not in itself an evasion? Would you not learn more about true piety from that believing pastor who once wanted to help you come to Christ? Or from your believing mother or grandmother who has been praying for you all these many years? Has your skepticism really made your life more comprehensible?

Let me make this first important point again: the gospel is for you—however well educated or intellectually endowed you may be. Your intellect and education are great gifts. But it is God who has given them to you. And if you do not thank him for these gifts and use them in ways that honor him, you are more deserving of judgment than those who are unintelligent. You need a Savior.

The apostle Paul had one of the best educations of his day, having been taught in the wisdom of the Greeks as well as in the religious traditions of Israel. He was a Roman citizen, too! But Paul learned that the gospel of the crucified Son of God alone was true wisdom. It was to people in an important Greek city that he wrote:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews

and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

To "Ordinary" People Everywhere

The Greeks called "barbarians" all who were not Greek, the next category of people to whom Paul says he was obliged to preach the gospel.

"Barbarian" did not have quite the negative overtones to the Greeks as it has for us. The word actually had to do with speech patterns, for when the Greeks heard "foreigners" speak, what they said sounded like babbling, or stammering: *bar, bar bar*. (The Greek word *barbaros* also is linked to the Sanskrit *barbera*, which referred to inarticulate speech.) So barbarians were people who did not speak Greek. But although the word did not have quite the negative overtones it has for us—some of the "barbarians" were quite cultured people—it nevertheless had some. Greek was the language of the educated. Since the histories, epics, and plays were in Greek, to be a barbarian was to be cut off from this cultural storehouse.

Perhaps you are a person who feels yourself similarly disadvantaged. I suppose there are more people today who feel themselves to be cut off from the mainstream of society than there are people who feel a part of it.

You may feel cut off because of a lack of educational opportunities. So many people have been to college. You have not. You have not read the books they have read and talk about. You are not at ease with the buzz words of the intellectual establishment—terms like, well, "buzz word" itself or "interface" or "existential." You do not speak as educated people do. Perhaps you have regional patterns to your speech or make mistakes in grammar.

You may feel cut off because of your race. No matter that others of your race have made it; they are exceptions, you think. You have not, and those who belong to other races, or who belong to your race and have made it to the top, never seem to let you forget your place.

You may feel cut off because of your low income, which shows in the clothes you wear, the neighborhood you live in, the car you drive, and many other distinctions.

For those and other reasons you feel left out. So you look at what the world calls "Christian people" and say, "Those are not *my* people. I don't belong in their company. Christianity is *their* religion. It is not mine."

Here I must ask forgiveness for what has become a terrible sin of the twentieth-century church. Somehow many people feel cut off from the fellowship of believers. As the gospel has succeeded in reaching people and transforming them, bringing them to new levels of opportunity and achievement, it has often taken on these new cultural overtones—just as you have seen. Christians too often forget that Jesus Christ did not go first to the wise, wealthy, or influential citizens of his day, but to the everyday people, whoever and wherever they were. The important people did not like him for it! They called him a friend of drunkards and sinners. Nevertheless, that is where he went. His friends were carpenters, fishermen, tax collectors, and others who worked hard for a living. After his death and resurrection, when the gospel began to spread beyond the geographical borders of Israel, it was among the working people—often among slaves—that it advanced most readily.

I apologize on behalf of any Christian who has given the impression that Christianity is only for the educated, influential, or wealthy. At the same time I urge you not to miss believing on Jesus Christ because of that sadly wrong impression.

In Paul's day there were not many who had the advantages of what we would call a university education, but Paul wrote to the others to say

that God had chosen them to expose the foolishness of merely human wisdom:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things —and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.... Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 1:26-29, 31

To Religious People Everywhere

In our text, Romans 1:14-15, Paul limits his "categories" of those who need the gospel to Greeks and non-Greeks, the wise and the foolish. I do not know why he stopped at that point. But it is significant that in the very next verse Paul adds another important category, when he distinguishes between the Jew and the Gentile (v. 16). In the first instance he was probably thinking of the Romans, who were largely Gentiles. But when he gives the full statement of his thesis in verse 16, he adds this additional category to indicate that the gospel is indeed for the entire world.

Isn't it surprising that Paul feels a need to mention Jews specifically? The gospel is about a Jew,
Jesus of Nazareth. It was taught, at least in the early days, exclusively from the Jewish Scriptures. The Old Testament is a Jewish book. The apostles and the early preachers of the gospel were all Jews. Why, then, should Jews specifically be mentioned?

The answer is that Jews as a whole, even more than Gentiles, resisted the gospel. Why? Because it did not fit their strong religious traditions. It is true that the gospel had been promised to Jews in the very Scriptures they defended. But they had imposed their own expectations

on those Scriptures and handled them so as to build their own feelings of self-righteousness rather than as a way to recognize sin and their need for the Savior whom God had promised to send. As a result, when God sent Jesus they resented his "independent" spirit and fought him when his moral perfection exposed their own deep sin.

It is the same today, in the sense that the gospel of salvation by Jesus Christ is resisted most by those who are "religious." Of all persons, religious people often have the least sense of personal need. Above all others, they especially think themselves to have achieved God's standards and deserve commendation by him. They resent being taught that they, too, are sinners, that they, too, need a Savior, that they, too, must come to God through simple faith—just as others. Yet they desperately need Jesus.

Are you one of those people? Do you feel secure in your religion—apart from Jesus? If so, you need to learn that no religion, even Christianity, can save you. Only God can save you. He has made provision for that through the work of Jesus Christ, his own Son, who died for you. That is the gospel. That is what you need. It is needed by everybody.

To Everybody Everywhere

At the close of his statement of obligation to the Greeks and non-Greeks, the wise and unwise, Paul explains his views by declaring, "That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome." When he mentions "you who are at Rome" Paul is not adding a new category, for the Romans fit within the earlier Greek or non-Greek, wise or foolish groupings. The church at Rome included every conceivable type of man or woman and was therefore itself allembracing. So I think that when Paul says that the gospel is for those at Rome "also" he is actually saying, "The gospel is for you, whoever you may be and wherever you may find yourself."

I present it to you in that way.

You may be a very young person with your whole life stretching before you. You have great plans, and you may have very little place for God

in those plans. If so, I tell you that the gospel is for you and that you need it, just as others do. Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said in a talk to children, "You may be young; but you are old enough to sin, and you are old enough to die." As long as that is true, you need a Savior.

You may be an older person, perhaps very along in years. You are thinking that life is almost over for you and that decisions of this scope are for young people. You may be thinking that it is too late to make changes. But you especially need the gospel. Soon you will stand before God, your Maker, and you will have to give an account for your many long years of sinning. You have heard the gospel. Will you have to tell God that you rejected it, that you spurned the offer of grace through his crucified Son, the Lord Jesus? It is not too late. Today can be the day of your salvation. If you turn to him now, you will find that the last years of your life will be the most important and precious of all.

Perhaps you are from a non-Western, non-English-speaking country. You may be reading these words in part because you are a guest in the United States or because you want to learn about America. You may think that what you are reading is something uniquely American, that it is not for you, not for one from your country or from your background. I tell you that it is for you. It is the gospel of the one God and of the one Savior. It is a gospel that has already permeated the entire world. It has come to you now. It is time for you to trust Jesus.

Perhaps you are an American, and you think that you already are a Christian—just because you have been born in a so-called Christian country. Being an American will not save you. Having a Christian tradition or even Christian parents will not save you. Belonging to a church will not save you. You need the gospel. You need to believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

The gospel is for those who live in Philadelphia. It is for those in New York. It is for those in Paris or Bombay or Beijing or Mombassa or Bogota. Whoever you are, you need the gospel. The whole world needs the gospel, and the gospel it needs is the whole gospel of God's grace to sinners through the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

If you are not a Christian, you need to hear this and come to the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.

If you are a Christian, you need to make this great good news known to other people, as Paul did.

Part Two.

The Heart of Biblical Religion

Chapter 11.
The Theme of the Epistle

Romans 1:16-17

In the sixteenth and seventeenth verses of Romans 1, we come to sentences that are the most important in the letter and perhaps in all literature. They are the theme of this epistle and the essence of Christianity. They are the heart of biblical religion.

The reason this is so is that they tell how a man or woman may become right with God. We are not right with God in ourselves. This is what the doctrine of original sin is all about. We are in rebellion against God; and if we are in rebellion against God, we cannot be right with him. On the contrary, we are to be judged by him. What is more, we are polluted by our sin. We are as filthy in God's sight as the most disease infected, loathsome individual could be in ours, and in that state we must be banished from his presence forever when we die.

What is to be done? On our side, nothing can be done. Yet in these sentences Paul tells us that God has done something. In fact, he has done precisely what needs to be done. He has provided a righteousness that is exactly what we need. It is a divine righteousness, a perfect righteousness. And it is received, not by doing righteous things (which we can never do in sufficient quantity anyway), but by simple faith. It is received merely by believing what God tells us.

No One Righteous

In the next chapter, continuing our study of this very important section of the letter to the Roman church, I will show why Paul was not ashamed of this gospel. Here, however, I want to concentrate on the chief idea in these two verses, namely, that in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed and that this righteousness is received (and has

always been received) by faith. The place to begin is with the fact that in ourselves we do not possess this righteousness.

There can be little objection to the statement that we do not possess true righteousness, because this is the point with which Paul begins his formal argument. That is, immediately after having stated his thesis in verses 16 and 17, Paul launches into a section extending from 1:18 to 3:20, in which he shows that far from being righteous before God, men and women are actually very corrupt and are all therefore naturally objects of God's just wrath and condemnation.

I make the point in this way. Notice that in verse 17 (our text here), Paul says that "a righteousness from God is revealed." Then notice that in 3:21, he says virtually the same thing once again: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify." The words "is made known" mean "is revealed," and the reference to "the Law and the Prophets" corresponds to Paul's citation of a specific statement of the prophet Habakkuk in the earlier verse: "just as it is written: 'the righteous will live by faith.'" So the full exposition of what Paul introduces in 1:17 begins only at 3:21.

So what occupies the intervening verses? They are a statement of the need for this righteousness, introduced by a parallel but deliberate contrast with these two statements. At the start of this section, instead of speaking of any revelation of righteousness, Paul declares: "The *wrath* of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18, italics mine).

What Paul says in Romans 1:18 through 3:20 embraces all persons. But he develops his thoughts progressively, moving from a description of those who are openly hostile to God and wicked to those who consider themselves to be either moral, and therefore acceptable to God on the basis of their own good works, or else religious, and therefore acceptable on the basis of their religious practices.

One thing is true of everyone. Left to ourselves, we use either our heathen lifestyle, our claims to moral superiority, or our religion to resist the true God. Paul says that certain facts about God have been revealed to all people in nature. But instead of allowing that revelation to point us to God and then attempting to seek him out as a result of it, we actually suppress the revelation God has given in order to continue in our own wicked ways. This is the real grounds of God's just wrath against us—not that we have failed to do something that we could not do or refused to believe something that we did not even know about, but that we have rejected the knowledge we have in order to pursue wickedness. When he gets to the end of this section Paul is therefore quite right in concluding, quoting from many Old Testament texts:

As it is written:

> "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.
> All have turned away, they have together become worthless;
> there is no one who does good, not even one."
> "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."
> "The poison of vipers is on their lips."
> "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."
> "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,
> and the way of peace they do not know."
> "There is no fear of God before their eyes."
>
> Romans 3:10-18

We may not like this description of ourselves (who would?), but it is God's accurate assessment of our depraved lives and civilization.

A Righteousness from God

In all literature there is no portrait of the human race so realistic, grim, or hopeless as this summation of Paul's. Yet it makes the wonder of the

gospel all the more glorious, for it is against this background that "a righteousness from God" is made known.

We need to see several important things about it.

1. *This righteousness from God is the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.* In 1:17 and 3:21, Paul says that righteousness "comes through faith in Jesus Christ." But it is surely right to add, in view of what Paul said in the opening section of this letter (and says elsewhere), that this is the very righteousness of Christ, which God gives to us. Righteousness is revealed in the gospel— Paul says so—but the gospel concerns Jesus Christ (1:2-3). So it is Christ who has this righteousness, and it is from him that we both learn about it and receive it.

Jesus possesses righteousness in two senses, both important. First, Jesus is intrinsically righteous.
That is, being God, he is utterly holy and without sin. That is why he could say during the days
of his flesh, "I always do what pleases him [that is, God]" (John 8:29b) or, as he said to his enemies on another occasion, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46a). His words left them speechless.

Jesus is also righteous in that he achieved a perfect righteousness by his obedience to the law of God while on earth. When John the Baptist resisted Jesus' call for baptism, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:14-15). By saying that it was proper for him to be baptized in order "to fulfill all righteousness," Jesus showed that he intended to fulfill the demands of the law while he lived among us. And he did. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written:

He rendered a perfect obedience to the law; he kept it in every jot and tittle. He failed in no respect. He fulfilled God's law completely, perfectly, and absolutely. Not only that! He has dealt with the penalty meted out by the law upon all sin and upon all sins. He took your guilt and mine upon himself, and he bore its punishment. The penalty of the

law was meted out upon him, and so he has honored the law completely, positively and negatively, actively and passively. There is nothing further the law can demand; he has satisfied it all.

When Paul says that righteousness from God is revealed in the gospel, he means that the gospel shows how we can acquire the righteousness we need. But this does not exclude the truth that the existence and nature of this righteousness are also revealed to us in Christ's person. In Christ we can see that righteousness truly exists and can be offered to us by God.

2. *God offers this righteousness of Jesus Christ freely, apart from any need to work for it on our part.* This is the heart of the Good News, of course. For unless God were willing to give this righteousness to us and actually does give it, the mere existence of a perfect righteousness would not be good news at all. On the contrary, it would be very bad news, for it would increase our sense of condemnation.

It was the discovery of this truth that transformed Martin Luther and through him launched the Reformation. Luther was aware that Jesus exhibited a perfect righteousness and that this was a standard of character rightly demanded from all human beings by God. But Luther did not have this righteousness. In fact, the more he tried to achieve this righteousness, the more elusive it became. It was Luther's very piety that created the problem. He wanted to be righteous. He wanted to please God. But the more he worked at pleasing God, the more he knew that pleasing God involved more than merely doing certain things and refusing to do others. He knew that pleasing God involved even the very attitudes in which he did or did not do these things. Basically he needed to love God, and he knew he did not love God. He actually hated God for making the standard of righteousness so impossible.

As I pointed out in the introductory chapter of this book, Luther wrote, "I had no love for that holy and just God who punishes sinners. I was filled with secret anger against him."

But then Luther discovered that he had misunderstood God's intention in revealing the nature and existence of this righteousness. It was not revealed so that men and women like Luther might strive toward it and inevitably fail desperately, as Luther did. It was revealed as God's free gift in Christ, so that those who came to know Christ might stop their fruitless striving and instead rest in him. They could rest in his atoning death on their behalf, since he took the punishment of their sins upon himself and paid for them fully so that their sins might never rise up to haunt them again. They could rest in righteousness, knowing that God had given it to them and that they could thereafter stand before God, not in their own self-righteousness, which is no righteousness at all, but in the very righteousness of Christ.

The term for the application of the righteousness of Christ to the sinner is "imputation." It is like putting the infinite moral capital of the Lord Jesus Christ in our empty bank account. It is having the riches of heaven at our disposal. When Luther saw this, it was as if the doors of heaven had been opened and he was able to pass through "the true gate of Paradise."

3. *Faith is the channel by which sinners receive Christ's righteousness.* Paul lived many centuries before the Reformation, but he seems to have anticipated the sixteenth-century battles over the role of faith in salvation by the way he emphasizes faith both in this initial statement of his thesis and in his fuller development of the role of faith in receiving the gospel in 3:21-31. In Romans 1:17, he speaks of "a righteousness that is *by faith* from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live *by faith,*'" quoting Habakkuk 2:4 (italics mine). In 3:21-31 he refers to "faith" eight times.

What is faith? Initially Luther thought of faith as a work and therefore grimly regarded it as something else to be attained. But faith is not a work. It is believing God. It is opening a hand to receive the righteousness of Christ that God offers.

Faith consists of three elements. First, it consists of *knowledge.* It is no mere attitude of mind; it involves content. We must have faith in

"something." In the case of salvation that content (and the object of our knowledge) is the revelation of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Second, faith consists of a *heart response* to the gospel. This is because faith is not assent to some principle that is true but nevertheless has little relationship to us. It involves the love of God for us in saving us through the death of Jesus Christ, his Son. Unless this touches our hearts and moves them, we do not really understand the gospel.

Finally, faith consists of *commitment,* commitment to Christ. At this point, Jesus becomes not merely a Savior in some abstract sense or even someone else's Savior, but *my* Savior. Like Thomas, I now gladly confess him to be "*My* Lord and *my* God" (John 20:28, italics mine).

In an excellent little book entitled *All of Grace,* the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, "Faith is not a blind thing; for faith begins with knowledge. It is not a speculative thing; for faith believes facts of which it is sure. It is not an unpractical, dreamy thing; for faith trusts, and stakes its destiny upon the truth of revelation.... Faith... is *the eye* which looks.... Faith is *the hand* which grasps... Faith is *the mouth* which feeds upon Christ."

One person who read Romans 10:8 (" 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart' ") exclaimed, "Give me a knife and a fork and a chance." He had the idea. He was prepared to receive the gospel personally.

Another who had the idea was Count Zinzendorf. His great hymn about justification through the righteousness of Christ received by faith comes to us through the translation of John Wesley:

> Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
> My beauty are, my glorious dress; 'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head.
> Bold shall I stand in thy great day,

For who aught to my charge shall lay? Fully absolved through these I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

O let the dead now hear thy voice;
Now bid thy banished ones rejoice;
Their beauty this, their glorious dress, Jesus, thy blood and righteousness.

It was by faith in the completed work of Christ and God's gift of Christ's righteousness to believing men and women that Zinzendorf expected to stand before God in the day of judgment and be accepted by him.

"Nothing in My Hands"

This was Paul's expectation and experience, too. He tells of his experience of God's grace in Philippians.

Paul had been an exceedingly moral man: ".... If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:4-6). But Paul learned to count his attainments as nothing in order to have Christ "and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (v. 9). This is a vivid, personal statement of what he also declares at the beginning of Romans.

In Philippians, Paul uses a helpful metaphor, saying that before he met Christ his thoughts about religion involved something like a lifelong balance sheet showing assets and liabilities. He had thought that being saved meant having more in the column of assets than in the column of liabilities. And since he had considerable assets, he felt that he was very well off indeed.

Some assets he had inherited. Among them were the facts that he had been born into a Jewish family and had been circumcised according to Jewish law on the eighth day of life. He was neither a proselyte who had been circumcised later in life, nor an Ishmaelite who was circumcised when he was thirteen years of age. He was a pure-blooded Jew, having been born of two Jewish parents ("a Hebrew of Hebrews"). As an Israelite he was a member of God's covenant people. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. Moreover, Paul had assets he had earned for himself. He was a Pharisee, the strictest and most faithful of the Jewish religious orders. He was a zealous Pharisee, proved by his persecution of the church. And, as far as the law was concerned, Paul reckoned himself to be blameless, for he had kept the law in all its particulars so far as he had understood it.

These were great assets from a human point of view. But the day came when God revealed his own righteousness to Paul in the person of Jesus Christ. When Paul saw Jesus he understood for the first time what real righteousness was. Moreover, he saw that what he had been calling righteousness, his *own* righteousness, was not righteousness at all but only filthy rags. It was no asset. It was actually a liability, because it had been keeping him from Jesus, where alone true righteousness could be found.

Mentally Paul moved his long list of cherished assets to the column of liabilities—for that is what they really were—and under assets he wrote "Jesus Christ alone." Augustus M. Toplady had it right in the hymn "Rock of Ages":

> Nothing in my hand I bring,
> Simply to thy cross I cling;
> Naked, come to thee for dress;
> Helpless, look to thee for grace;
> Foul, I to the fountain fly;
> Wash me, Saviour, or I die.
> Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
> Let me hide myself in thee.

When those who have been made alive by God turn from their own attempts at righteousness, which can only condemn them, and instead embrace the Lord Jesus Christ by saving faith, God declares their sins to have been punished in Christ and imputes his own perfect righteousness to their account.

Chapter 12.
Not Ashamed

Romans 1:16-17

At first glance it is an extraordinary thing that Paul should say that he is "not ashamed" of the gospel. For when we read that statement we ask, "But why should anybody be ashamed of the gospel? Why should the apostle even think that something so grand might be shameful?" Questions like that are not very deep or honest, since we have all been ashamed of the gospel at one time or another.

The reason is that the world is opposed to God's gospel and ridicules it, and we are all far more attuned to the world than we imagine. The gospel was despised in Paul's day. Robert Haldane has written accurately:

By the pagans it was branded as atheism, and by the Jews it was abhorred as subverting the law and tending to licentiousness, while both Jews and Gentiles united in denouncing the Christians as disturbers of the public peace, who, in their pride and presumption, separated themselves from the rest of mankind. Besides, a crucified Savior was to the one a stumbling-block, and to the other foolishness. This doctrine was everywhere spoken against, and the Christian fortitude of the apostle in acting on the avowal he here makes was as truly manifested in the calmness with which, for the name of the Lord Jesus, he confronted personal danger and even death itself. His courage was not more conspicuous when he was ready "not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem," than when he was enabled to enter Athens or Rome

without being moved by the prospect of all that scorn and derision which in these great cities awaited him.

Is the situation different in our day? It is true that today's culture exhibits a certain veneer of religious tolerance, so that well-bred people are careful not to scorn Christians openly. But the world is still the world, and hostility to God is always present. If you have never been ashamed of the gospel, the probable reason, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests, is not that you are "an exceptionally good Christian," but rather that "your understanding of the Christian message has never been clear."

Was Paul tempted to shame, as we are? Probably. We know that Timothy was, since Paul wrote him to tell him not to be (2 Tim. 1:8). However, in our text Paul writes that basically he was "*not* ashamed of the gospel," and the reason is that "it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

In this study, following the treatment of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, I want to suggest eight reasons why we should not be ashamed of this gospel.

The Gospel Is "Good News"

The first reason why we should not be ashamed of the gospel is the meaning of the word *gospel* itself. It means "good news," and no rational person should be ashamed of a desirable proclamation.

We can understand why one might hesitate to convey bad news, of course. We can imagine a policeman who must tell a father that his son has been arrested for breaking into a neighbor's house and stealing her possessions. We can understand how he might be distressed at having to communicate this sad message. Or again, we can imagine how a doctor might be dismayed at having to tell a patient that tests have come out badly and that he or she does not have long to live, or how a person

involved in some great moral lapse might be ashamed to confess it. But the gospel is not like this. It is the opposite. Instead of being bad news, it is good news about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is the best news imaginable.

The Way of Salvation

The second reason why we should not be ashamed of the gospel is that it is about "salvation." And not just any salvation. It is about the saving of ourselves.

The background for this side of the Good News is that, left to ourselves, we are in desperate trouble. We are in trouble now because we are at odds with God, other people, and ourselves. We are also in trouble in regard to the future; for we are on a path of increasing frustration and despair, and at the end we must face God's just wrath and condemnation. We are like swimmers drowning in a vast ocean of cold water or explorers sinking in a deep bog of quicksand. We are like astronauts lost in the black hostile void of outer space. We are like prisoners awaiting execution.

But there is good news! God has intervened to rescue us through the work of his divine Son, Jesus Christ. First, he has reconciled us to himself; Christ has died for us, bearing our sins in his own body on the cross. Second, he has reconciled us to others; we are now set free to love them as Jesus loved us. Third, he has reconciled us to ourselves; in Jesus Christ (and by the power of the Holy Spirit) we are now able to become what God has always meant for us to be.

We can say this in yet other ways. Salvation delivers us from the guilt, power, and pollution of sin. We are brought back into communication with God, from whom our sins had separated us. And we are given a marvelous destiny, which Paul elsewhere describes as "the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul expresses these truths somewhat
comprehensively when he writes that "Christ Jesus... has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and

redemption." Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, because it was about a real deliverance—from sin and its power—and about reconciliation to God.

God's Way of Salvation

The third reason why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel is that it is God's way of salvation and not man's way. How could Paul be proud of something that has its roots in the abilities of sinful men and women or is bounded by mere human ideas? The world does not lack such ideas. There are countless schemes for salvation, countless self-help programs. But these are all foolish and inadequate. What is needed is a way of salvation that comes not from man, but from God! That is what we have in Christianity! Christianity is God's reaching out to save perishing men and women, not sinners reaching out to seize God.

Paul speaks about this in two major ways, contrasting God's way of salvation with our own attempts to keep the law, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with our attempts to know God by mere human wisdom.

As to the law, he says, "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4). This means that, although we could not please God by keeping the law's demands, God enables us to please him, first, by condemning sin in us through the work of Jesus Christ and, then, by enabling us to live upright lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As to wisdom, Paul writes, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

The Power of God

This leads to the fourth reason why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, the matter he chiefly emphasizes in our text: The gospel is powerful. That is, it is not only good news, not only a matter of salvation, not only a way of salvation from God; it is also powerful enough to accomplish God's purpose, which is to save us from sin's pollution.

It is important to understand what is involved here, for it is easy to misconstrue Paul's teaching. When Paul says that "the gospel... is the power of God for salvation," he is not saying that the gospel is *about* God's power, as if it were merely pointing us to a power beyond our own. Nor is Paul saying that the gospel is the *source* of a power we can get and use to save ourselves. Paul's statement is not that the gospel is about God's power or even a channel through which that power operates, but rather that the gospel is *itself* that power. That is, *the gospel is powerful;* it is the means by which God accomplishes salvation in those who are being saved.

Since Paul puts it this way, we are right to agree with John Calvin when he emphasizes that the gospel mentioned here is not merely the work done by God in Jesus Christ or the revelation to us of that work, but the actual "preaching" of the gospel "by word of mouth." He means that it is in the actual preaching of the gospel that the power of God is demonstrated in the saving of men and women.

In the previous section I quoted what the King James Version calls "the foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21), and since that is Paul's own phrase, we can see it as proof that Paul was himself aware of how foolish the proclamation of the Christian message is if considered only from a human point of view. Some years ago I had the task of talking about "The Foolishness of Preaching" as one message of seven in a weekend conference on reformed theology. My address came after a break for lunch in the middle of what was a very long Saturday, and I began by saying that if there was anything more foolish than the foolishness of preaching, it was preaching about the foolishness of preaching after lunch on a day during which the listeners had already

heard a number of other very distinguished preachers. It was a way of capturing what every preacher feels at one time or another as he rises to proclaim a message that to the natural mind is utter folly and that is as incapable of doing good in the hearers as preaching a message of moral reformation to the corpses in a cemetery—*unless* God works.

But that is just the point! God does work through the preaching of this gospel—not preaching for its own sake, but the faithful proclamation of God's work of salvation for sinful men and women in Jesus Christ.

Let me say this another way since it is so important. We read in the first chapter of Acts that when the Lord Jesus Christ dispatched his disciples to the world with his gospel, he told them: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). Earlier they had been asking about the kingdom of God, no doubt thinking of an earthly, political kingdom, which they highly valued and hoped for. But Jesus' reply pointed them to something far greater. His was a spiritual kingdom—not spiritual in the sense of being less than real, but a kingdom to be established in power by the very Spirit of God—and they were to be witnesses for him. Moreover, as they witnessed, the Holy Spirit, which was to come upon them, would bless their proclamation and lead many to faith.

And so it happened. Three thousand believed at Pentecost. Thousands more believed on other occasions.

So also today. The world does not understand this divine working, but it is nevertheless true that the most important thing happening in the world at any given time is the preaching of the gospel. For there the Spirit of God is at work. There men and women are delivered from the bondage of sin and set free spiritually. Lives are transformed—and it is all by God's power. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The thing to grasp is that the apostle is saying that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is of God's mighty working. It is God himself doing this thing—not simply telling us about it: doing it, and doing it in this way, through the gospel."

A Gospel for Everyone

The fifth reason why Paul was not ashamed of this gospel is that it is a gospel for everyone— "everyone who believes." It is "first for the Jew" and then also "for the Gentile."

Paul's phrase "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" has led readers to think that he was saying something like "to the Jew above the Gentile" or "to the Jew simply because he is a Jew and therefore of greater importance than other people." But, of course, this is not what Paul intends. In this text Paul means exactly the same thing Jesus meant when he told the woman of Samaria that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Both were speaking chronologically. Both meant that in the systematic disclosure of the gospel the Jews had occupied a first and important place. This was because, as Paul says later in Romans, theirs was "the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Jesus Christ..." (Rom. 9:3-5). No one can fully understand the gospel if he or she neglects this historical preparation for it.

But this does not mean that Paul is setting the Jew above the Gentile in this text or, as some would desire by contrast, that he is setting the Gentile above the Jew. On the contrary, Paul's point is that the gospel is for Gentile and Jew alike. It is for everybody.

Why? Because it is the power of God, and God is no respecter of persons. If the gospel were of human power only, it would be limited by human interests and abilities. It would be for some and not others. It would be for the strong but not for the weak, or the weak but not for the strong. It would be for the intelligent but not the foolish, or the foolish but not the wise. It would be for the noble or the well-bred or the sensitive or the poor or the rich or whatever, to the exclusion of those who do not fit the categories. But this is not the way it is. The gospel is for everyone. John wrote, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, italics mine). At Pentecost Peter declared,

"*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21; cf. Joel 2:32). Indeed, the Bible ends on this note: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' *Whoever* is thirsty, let him come; and *whoever* wishes, let him take of the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17). (I have added italics to these passages to emphasize this important point.)

How can one be ashamed of a gospel which offers hope to the vilest, most desperate of men, as well as to the most respectable person? How can we be ashamed of anything so gloriously universal.

Salvation Revealed to Sinners

The sixth reason why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel is that God has revealed this way of salvation to us. The gospel would be wonderful even if God had not revealed it. But, of course, if he had not revealed it, we would not know of it and would be living with the same dreary outlook on life as the unsaved. But the gospel *is* revealed. Now we not only know about the Good News but are also enabled to proclaim God's revelation.

And there is this, too: When Paul says that the gospel of God "is revealed," he is saying that it is only by revelation that we can know it. It is not something we could ever have figured out for ourselves. How could we have invented such a thing? When human beings invent religion they either invent something that makes them self-righteous, imagining that they can save themselves by their own good works or wisdom—or they invent something that excuses their behavior so they can commit the evil they desire. In other words, they become either legalists or antinomians. The gospel produces neither. It does not produce legalists, because salvation is by the accomplishment of Christ, not the accomplishments of human beings.

Christians must always sing: "Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to thy cross I cling." But at the same time, simply because they have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ and have his Spirit within them,

Christians inevitably strive for and actually achieve a level of practical righteousness of which the world cannot even dream.

A Righteousness from God

The seventh reason why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel is the one we considered most fully in the previous chapter, namely, that it concerns a righteousness from God, which is what we need. In ourselves we are not the least bit righteous. On the contrary, we are corrupted by sin and are in rebellion against God. To be saved from wrath we need a righteousness that is of God's own nature, a righteousness that comes from God and fully satisfies God's demands. This is what we have! It is why Paul can begin his exposition of the Good News in chapter 3 by declaring, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (v. 21). (As previously mentioned, this verse is a repetition of the thesis presented first in Romans 1:17.)

By Faith from First to Last

The eighth and final reason why the apostle Paul was not ashamed of the gospel is that the means by which this glorious gift becomes ours is faith, which means that salvation is accessible to

"everyone who believes."

What does Paul mean when he writes, *ek pisteōs eis pistin* (literally, "from faith to faith")? Does he mean, as the New International Version seems to imply, "by faith entirely" (that is, "by faith from first to last")? Does he mean "from the faith of the Old Testament to the faith of the New Testament" or, which may be almost the same thing, "from the faith of the Jew to the faith of the
Gentile"? Does he mean "from weak faith to stronger faith," the view apparently of John Calvin? In my opinion, the quotation from Habakkuk throws light on how the words *ek pisteōs* are to be taken. They mean "by faith"; that is, they concern "a righteousness that is by faith." If this is so, if this is how the first "faith" should be taken, then, the meaning of the phrase is that the righteousness that is by faith (the

first "faith") is revealed to the perceiving faith of the believer (the second "faith"). This means that the gospel is revealed to you and is for you—if you will have it.

Chapter 13.
Martin Luther's Text

Romans 1:17

In the year 1920 an English preacher by the name of Frank W. Boreham published a book of sermons on great Bible texts, in each case linking his text to the spiritual history of a great Christian man or woman. He called his book *Texts That Made History*. There was David Livingstone's text: Matthew 28:20 ("Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age"). There was John Wesley's text: Zechariah 3:2 ("Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"). There were twenty-three sermons in this book, and Boreham published four more similar books in his lifetime.

Of all the texts that are associated with the lives of great Christians, none is so clearly one man's text or so obviously a driving, molding force in that man's life as Roman 1:17. And, of course, the man whose text it was is Martin Luther.

I propose that we study Romans 1:17 from the standpoint of Luther's life. Already we have seen that Romans 1:16-17 are the theme verses of this important Bible book. We have studied them from two perspectives. The first study focused on the chief idea: that there is a righteousness from God, which God freely offers human beings and which alone is the basis of their justification before him. It is received by faith. The second study worked through these verses in detail, showing eight reasons why Paul could say (and all true believers today can continue to say) that they are not ashamed of God's gospel. In this study we want to see the outworking of that gospel in the life of just one man, Martin Luther.

In the Convent at Erfurt

Martin Luther began his academic life by studying law, which was his father's desire for him. But although he excelled in his studies and gave every promise of becoming successful in his profession, Luther was troubled in soul and greatly agitated at the thought that one day he would have to meet God and give an account before him. In his boyhood days he had looked at the frowning face of Jesus in the stained-glass window of the parish church at Mansfeld and had trembled. When friends died, as during his college days two of his closest friends did, Luther trembled more. One day he would die—he knew not when—and he knew that Jesus would judge him.

On August 17, 1505, Luther suddenly left the university and entered the monastery of the Augustinian hermits at Erfurt. He was twenty-one years old, and he entered the convent, as he later said, not to study theology but to save his soul.

In those days in the monastic orders there were ways by which the seeking soul was directed to find God, and Luther, with the determination and force that characterized his entire life, gave himself rigorously to the Augustinian plan. He fasted and prayed. He devoted himself to menial tasks. Above all he adhered to the sacrament of penance, confessing even the most trivial sins, for hours on end, until his superiors wearied of his exercise and ordered him to cease confession until he had committed some sin worth confessing. Luther's piety gained him a reputation of being the most exemplary of monks. Later he wrote to the Duke of Saxony:

I was indeed a pious monk and followed the rules of my order more strictly than I can express. If ever a monk could obtain heaven by his monkish works, I should certainly have been entitled to it. Of this all the friars who have known me can testify. If it had continued much longer, I should have carried my mortification even to death, by means of my watchings, prayers, reading and other labors.

Still, Luther found no peace through these exercises.

The monkish wisdom of the day instructed him to satisfy God's demand for righteousness by doing good works. "But what works?" thought Luther. "What works can come from a heart like mine? How can I stand before the holiness of my Judge with works polluted in their very source?"

In Luther's agony of soul, God sent him a wise spiritual father by the name of John Staupitz, the vicar-general of the congregation. Staupitz tried to uncover Luther's difficulties. "Why are you so sad, brother Martin?" Staupitz asked one day.

"I do not know what will become of me," replied Luther with a deep sigh.

"More than a thousand times have I sworn to our holy God to live piously, and I have never kept my vows," said Staupitz. "Now I swear no longer, for I know that I cannot keep my solemn promises. If God will not be merciful towards me for the love of Christ and grant me a happy departure when I must quit this world, I shall never with the aid of all my vows and all my good works stand before him. I must perish."

The thought of divine justice terrified Luther, and he opened up his fears to the vicar-general.

Staupitz knew where he himself had found peace and pointed it out to the young man: "Why do you torment yourself with all these speculations and these high thoughts?... Look at the wounds of Jesus Christ, to the blood that he has shed for you; it is there that the grace of God will appear to you. Instead of torturing yourself on account of your sins, throw yourself into the Redeemer's arms. Trust in him—in the righteousness of his life—in the atonement of his death. Do not shrink back. God is not angry with you; it is you who are angry with God. Listen to the Son of God."

But how could Luther do that? Where could he hear the Son of God speak to him as Staupitz said he would? "In the Bible," said the vicar-general. It was thus that Luther, who had only first seen a Bible in his

college days shortly before entering the cloister, began to study Scripture.

He studied Romans, and as he pondered over the words of our text the truth began to dawn on him. The righteousness we need in order to stand before the holy God is not a righteousness we can attain. In fact, it is not human righteousness at all. It is divine righteousness, and it becomes ours as a result of God's free giving. Our part is merely to receive it by faith and to live by faith in God's promise. Guided by this new light, Luther began to compare Scripture with Scripture, and as he did he found that the passages of the Bible that formerly alarmed him now brought comfort.

In his sermon on Luther's text, Boreham describes a famous painting that represents Luther at this stage of his pilgrimage. The setting is early morning in the convent library at Erfurt, and the artist shows Luther as a young monk in his early twenties, poring over a copy of the Bible from which a bit of broken chain is hanging. The dawn is stealing through the lattice, illuminating both the open Bible and the face of its eager reader. On the page the young monk is so carefully studying are the words: "The just shall live by faith."

The Road to Rome

In 1510, five years after he had become a monk and two years after he had begun to teach the Bible at the new University of Wittenberg, Luther was sent by his order to Rome.

On the way, while being entertained at the Benedictine monastery at Bologna, Luther fell dangerously ill and relapsed into the gloomy dejection over spiritual matters that was so natural to him. "To die thus, far from Germany, in a foreign land—what a sad fate!" D'Aubigné wrote, "... the distress of mind that he had felt at Erfurt returned with renewed force. The sense of his sinfulness troubled him; the prospect of God's judgment filled him once more with dread. But at the very moment that these terrors had reached their highest pitch, the words of St. Paul, 'The just shall live by faith,' recurred forcibly to his memory

and enlightened his soul like a ray from heaven." Luther was learning to live by faith, which was what the text was teaching. Comforted and eventually restored to health, he resumed his journey across the hot Italian plains to Rome.

"Thou Holy Rome, Thrice Holy"

Luther had been sent to Rome on church business. But, in spite of this, he approached the ancient imperial city as a pilgrim. When he first caught sight of Rome on his way south he raised his hands in ecstasy, exclaiming, "I greet thee, thou holy Rome, thrice holy from the blood of the martyrs." When he arrived, he began his rounds of the relics, shrines, and churches. He listened to the superstitious tales that were told him. At one chapel, when told of the benefits of saying Mass there, he thought that he could almost wish his parents were dead, because he could then have assured them against purgatory by his actions.

Yet Rome was not the center of light and piety Luther had imagined. At this time, the Mass—at which the body and blood of Jesus were thought to be offered up by the priests as a sacrifice for sins—was the center of Luther's devotion, and he often said Mass at Rome. Luther performed the ceremony with the solemnity and dignity it seemed to him to require. But not the Roman priests!

They laughed at the simplicity of the rustic German monk. Once, while he was repeating one

Mass, the priests at an adjoining altar rushed through seven of them, calling out in Latin to Luther, "Quick, quick, send our Lady back her Son." On another occasion, Luther had only reached the gospel portion of the Mass when the priest administering beside him terminated his. *"Passa, passa,"* he cried to Luther. "Have done with it at once."

Luther was invited to meetings of distinguished ecclesiastics. There the priests often ridiculed and mocked Christian rites. Laughing and with apparent pride, they told how, when they were standing at the altar repeating the words that were to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, they said instead (no doubt with solemn intonation), "*Panis es, et panis manebis; vinum es, et vinum manebis*"

("Bread you are, and bread you will remain; wine you are, and wine you will remain"). Luther could hardly believe his ears. Later he wrote, "No one can imagine what sins and infamous actions are committed in Rome; they must be seen and heard to be believed. Thus, they are in the habit of saying, 'If there is a Hell, Rome is built over it; it is an abyss whence issues every kind of sin.'" He concluded, "The nearer we approach Rome, the greater number of bad Christians we meet with."

Then there occurred the famous incident told many years later by Luther's son, Dr. Paul Luther, and preserved in a manuscript in the library of Rudolfstadt. In the Church of St. John Lateran in Rome there is a set of medieval stone stairs said to have originally been the stairs leading up to
Pilate's house in Jerusalem, once trod upon by the Lord. For this reason they were called the *Scala Sancta* or "Holy Stairs." It was the custom for pilgrims, like Luther, to ascend these steps on their knees, praying as they went. At certain intervals there were stains said to have been caused by the bleeding wounds of Christ. The worshiper would bend over and kiss these steps, praying a long time before ascending painfully to the next ones. Remission of years of punishment in purgatory was promised to all who would perform this pious exercise.

Luther began as the others had. But, as he ascended the staircase, the words of our text came forcefully to his mind: "The just shall live by faith."

They seemed to echo over and over again, growing louder with each repetition: "The just shall live by faith," "The just shall live by faith." But Luther was not living by faith. He was living by fear. The old superstitious doctrines and the new biblical theology wrestled within him.

"By fear," said Luther.

"By faith!" said St. Paul.

"By fear," said the scholastic fathers of medieval Catholicism.

"By faith!" said the Scriptures.

"By fear," said those who agonized beside him on the staircase.

"By faith!" said God the Father.

At last Luther rose in amazement from the steps up which he had been dragging himself and shuddered at his superstition and folly. Now he realized that God had saved him by the righteousness of Christ, received by faith; he was to exercise that faith, receive that righteousness, and live by trusting God. He had not been doing it. Slowly he turned on Pilate's staircase and returned to the bottom. He went back to Wittenberg, and in time, as Paul Luther said, "He took 'The just shall live by faith' as the foundation of all his doctrine."

This was the real beginning of the Reformation, for the reformation of Luther necessarily preceded the reformation of Christendom. The later began on October 31, 1517, with the posting of his "Ninety-Five Theses" on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg.

J. H. Merle D'Aubigné, the great nineteenth-century historian of the Reformation, wrote:

This powerful text had a mysterious influence on the life of Luther. It was a creative sentence both for the reformer and for the Reformation. It was in these words God then said, "Let there be light! and there was light."... When Luther rose from his knees on Pilate's Staircase, in agitation and amazement at those words which Paul had addressed fifteen centuries before to the inhabitants of that same metropolis—Truth, till then a melancholy captive, fettered in the church, rose also to fall no more.

"Here I Stand"

When Luther rose from his knees on the steps of the *Scala Sancta,* the high point of his long career—his refusal to recant his faith before the imperial diet at Worms—was still eleven years away. But Luther was already prepared for this challenge. He would be ready to defend his

position, because he now saw that a man or woman is not enabled to stand before God by his or her own accomplishments, however devout, still less by the pronouncements of ecclesiastical councils or popes, however vigorously enforced, but by the grace and power of Almighty God alone. And if a person can stand before God by grace, he can certainly stand before men.

Luther was summoned before the diet by the newly elected emperor, Charles V. But it was really the Roman See that had summoned him, and the champions of Rome were present to secure his condemnation. Upon his arrival at the town hall assembly room at four o'clock on the afternoon of April 17, Luther was asked to acknowledge as his writings a large stack of books that had been gathered and placed in the room. He was also asked whether he would retract their contents, which called for reform of abuses rampant in the church, asserted the right of the individual Christian to be emancipated from priestly bondage, and reaffirmed the fundamental doctrine of justification by faith.

Luther asked that the titles might be read out. Then he responded, "Most gracious emperor! Gracious princes and lords! His imperial majesty has asked me two questions. As to the first, I acknowledge as mine the books that have just been named. I cannot deny them. As to the second, seeing that it is a question which concerns faith and the salvation of souls, and in which the Word of God, the greatest and most precious treasure either in heaven or earth, is interested, I should act imprudently were I to reply without reflection.... For this reason I entreat your imperial majesty, with all humility, to allow me time, that I may answer without offending against the Word of God."

It was a proper request in so grave a matter. Besides, by taking reasonable time to reflect on his answer, Luther would give stronger proof of the firmness of his stand when he made it. There was debate concerning this request, but at last Luther was given twenty-four hours to consider his response.

When he appeared the next day, the demand was the same: "Will you defend your books as a whole, or are you ready to disavow some of

them?"

Luther replied by making distinctions between his writings, trying to draw the council into debate and thus have an opportunity to present the true gospel. Some of his books treated the Christian faith in language acceptable to all men. To repudiate these would be a denial of Jesus Christ. A second category attacked the errors and tyranny of the papacy. To deny these would lend additional strength to this tyranny, and thus be a sin against the German people. A third class of books concerned individuals and their teachings. Here Luther confessed that he may have spoken harshly or unwisely. But if so, it was necessary for his adversaries to bear witness of the evil done. Luther said he would be the first to throw his books into the fire if it could be proved that he had erred in these or any others of his writings.

"But you have not answered the question put to you," said the moderator. "Will you, or will you not, retract?"

Upon this, Luther replied without hesitation: "Since your most serene majesty and your high mightiness require from me a clear, simple, and precise answer, I will give you one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the councils, because it is clear to me as the day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning—unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted—and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience."

Then looking around at those who held his life in their hands, Luther said: "Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen." Thus did the German monk utter the words that still thrill our hearts after four and a half centuries.

The Master of All Doctrines

Later in life Luther was to write many things about the doctrine of justification by faith, which he had learned from Romans 1:17. He would call it "the chief article from which all our other doctrines have flowed." He called it "the master and prince, the lord, the ruler and the judge over all kinds of doctrines." He said, "If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time." He argued, "It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God, and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour." What a heritage! What a rebuke against the weak state of present-day Christianity!

If justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, our contemporary declines are no doubt due to our failure to understand, appreciate, and live by this doctrine. The church of our day does not stand tall before the world. It bows to it. Christians are not fearless before ridicule. We flee from it. Is the reason not that we have never truly learned to stand before God in his righteousness? Is it not because we have never learned the truth: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31b)? The church will never be strong unless it is united around faithful men and women who firmly hold this conviction.

Part Three. The Race in Ruin

Chapter 14.

The Angry God

Romans 1:18

Today's preaching is deficient at many points. But there is no point at which it is more evidently inadequate and even explicitly contrary to the teachings of the New Testament than in its neglect of "the wrath of God." God's wrath is a dominant Bible teaching and the point in Romans at which Paul begins his formal exposition of the gospel. Yet, to judge from most contemporary forms of Christianity, the wrath of God is either an unimportant doctrine, which is an embarrassment, or an entirely wrong notion, which any enlightened Christian should abandon.

Weakness of Contemporary Preaching

Where do most people begin when making a presentation of Christian truth, assuming that they even speak of it to others? Where does most of today's Christian "preaching" begin?

Many begin with what is often termed "a felt need," a lack or a longing that the listener will acknowledge. The need may involve feelings of inadequacy; a recognition of problems in the individual's personal relationships or work or aspirations; moods; fears; or simply bad habits. The basic issue may be loneliness, or it may be uncontrollable desires. According to this theory, preaching should begin with felt needs, because this alone establishes a point of contact with a listener and wins a hearing. But does it? Oh, it may establish a contact between the teacher and the listener. But this is not the same thing as establishing contact between the listener and God, which is what preaching is about. Nor is it even necessarily a contact between the listener and the truth, since felt needs are often anything but our real needs; rather, they can actually be a means of suppressing them.

Here is the way Paul speaks of a felt need in another letter: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3). "What their itching ears want to hear" is a classic example of a felt need. In this passage the apostle warns Timothy not to cater to it. Obviously he himself did not structure the presentation of his gospel around such "needs."

Another way we present the gospel today is by promises. We offer them like a carrot, a reward to be given if only the listener accepts Jesus. Through this approach, becoming a Christian is basically presented as a means of getting something. Sometimes this is propounded in a frightfully unbiblical way, so that what emerges is a "prosperity gospel" in which God is supposed to be obliged to grant wealth, health, and success to the believer.

We also commonly offer the gospel by the route of personal experience, stressing what Jesus has done for us and commending it to the other person for that reason.

The point I am making is that Paul does not do this in Romans, and in this matter he rebukes us profitably. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it like this:

Why is he [Paul] ready to preach the gospel in Rome or anywhere else? He does not say it is because he knows that many of them [the Romans] are living defeated lives and that he has got something to tell them that will give them victory. He does not say to them, "I want to come and preach the gospel to you in Rome because I have had a marvelous experience and I want to tell you about it, in order that you may have the same experience—because you can if you want it; it is there for you."

This is not what Paul does.... There is no mention here of any experience. He is not talking in terms of their happiness or some particular state of mind, or something that might appeal to them, as

certain possibilities do—but this staggering, amazing thing, the wrath of God! And he puts it first; it is the thing he says at once.

The reason, of course, is that Paul was God-centered, rather than man-centered, and he was concerned with that central focus. Most of us are weak, fuzzy, or wrong at this point. Paul knew that what matters in the final analysis is not whether we feel good or have our felt needs met or receive a meaningful experience. What matters is whether we come into a right relationship with God. And to have that happen we need to begin with the truth that we are not in a right relationship to him. On the contrary, we are under God's wrath and are in danger of everlasting condemnation at his hands.

Wrath: A Biblical Idea

There is a problem at this point, of course, and the problem is that most people think in human categories rather than in the terms of Scripture. When we do that, "wrath" inevitably suggests something like capricious human anger or malice. God's wrath is not the same thing as human anger, of course. But because we fail to appreciate this fact, we are uneasy with the very idea of God's wrath and think that it is somehow unworthy of God's character. So we steer away from the issue.

The biblical writers had no such reticence. They spoke of God's wrath frequently, obviously viewing it as one of God's great "perfections"—alongside his other attributes. Says J. I. Packer, "One of the most striking things about the Bible is the vigor with which both Testaments emphasize the reality and terror of God's wrath." Arthur W. Pink wrote, "A study of the
concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God than there are to His love and tenderness."

In the Old Testament more than twenty words are used to refer to God's wrath. (Other, very different words relate to human anger.) There are nearly six hundred important passages on the subject. These passages are not isolated or unrelated, as if they had been added to the Old

Testament at some later date by a particularly gloomy redactor. They are basic and are integrated with the most important themes and events of Scripture.

The earliest mentions of the wrath of God are in connection with the giving of the law at Sinai.
The first occurs just two chapters after the account of the giving of the Ten Commandments: "[The Lord said,] 'Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger [wrath] will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless'" (Exod. 22:22-24).

Ten chapters later in Exodus, in a very important passage about the sin of Israel in making and worshiping the golden calf (a passage to which we will return), God and Moses discuss wrath. God says, "Now leave me alone so that my anger [wrath] may burn against them and that I may destroy them...." But Moses pleads, "Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people" (Exod. 32:10-12).

In this early and formative passage, Moses does not plead with God on the grounds of some supposed innocence of the people—they were not innocent, and Moses knew it—nor with the fantasy that wrath is somehow unworthy of God's character. Rather Moses appeals only on the grounds that God's judgment would be misunderstood and that his name would be dishonored by the heathen.

There are two main words for wrath in the New Testament. One is *thymos*, from a root that means "to rush along fiercely," "to be in a heat of violence," or "to breathe violently." We can capture this idea by the phrase "a panting rage." The other word is *orgē* which means "to grow ripe for something." It portrays wrath as something that builds up over a long period of time, like water collecting behind a great dam. In his

study of *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Leon Morris notes that apart from the Book of Revelation, which describes the final outpouring of God's wrath in all its unleashed fury, *thumos* is used only once of God's anger. The word used in every other passage is *orgē*. Morris observes, "The biblical writers habitually use for the divine wrath a word which denotes not so much a sudden flaring up of passion which is soon over, as a strong and settled opposition to all that is evil arising out of God's very nature."

John Murray describes wrath in precisely this way when he writes in his classic definition: "Wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness."

We find this understanding of the wrath of God in Romans. In this letter Paul refers to wrath ten times. But in each instance the word he uses is *orgē*, and his point is not that God is suddenly flailing out in petulant anger against something that has offended him momentarily, but rather that God's firm, fearsome hatred of all wickedness is building up and will one day result in the eternal condemnation of all who are not justified by Christ's righteousness. Romans 1:17 says, on the basis of Habakkuk 2:4, that "the righteous will live by faith." But those who do *not* live by faith will not live; they will perish. Thus, in Romans 2:5 we find Paul writing, "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."

Wrath Revealed

But it is not only a matter of God's wrath being "stored up" for a final great outpouring at the last day. There is also a present manifesting of this wrath, which is what Paul seems to be speaking of in our text when he says, using the present rather than the future tense of the verb, "The wrath of God *is being revealed* from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." How is this so? In what way is the wrath of God currently being made manifest?

Commentators on Romans suggest a number of observations at this point, listing ways in which
God's wrath against sin seems to be disclosed. Charles Hodge speaks of three such manifestations: "the actual punishment of sin," "the inherent tendency of moral evil to produce misery," and "the voice of conscience."

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones lists "conscience," "disease and illness," "the state of creation," "the universality of death," "history," and (the matter he thinks Paul mainly had in view) "the cross" and "resurrection of Christ."

Robert Haldane has a comprehensive statement:

The wrath of God... was revealed when the sentence of death was first pronounced, the earth cursed and man driven out of the earthly paradise, and afterward by such examples of punishment as those of the deluge and the destruction of the cities of the plain by fire from heaven, but especially by the reign of death throughout the world. It was proclaimed by the curse of the law on every transgression and was intimated in the institution of sacrifice and in all the services of the Mosaic dispensation. In the eighth chapter of this epistle the apostle calls the attention of believers to the fact that the whole creation has become subject to vanity and groaneth and travaileth together in pain. This same creation which declares that there is a God, and publishes his glory, also proves that he is the enemy of sin and the avenger of the crimes of men.... But above all, the wrath of God was revealed from heaven when the Son of God came down to manifest the divine character, and when that wrath was displayed in his sufferings and death in a manner more awful than by all the tokens God had before given of his displeasure against sin.

Each of these explanations of the present revelation of the wrath of God is quite accurate. But in my opinion Paul has something much more specific in view here, the matter that Charles Hodge alone mentions specifically: "the inherent tendency of moral evil to produce misery." This is what Paul goes on to develop in Romans 1. In verses 21 through

32 Paul speaks of a downward inclination of the race by which the world, having rejected God and therefore being judicially abandoned by God, is given up to evil. It is set on a course that leads to perversions and ends in a debasement in which people call good evil and evil good. Human depravity and the misery involved are the revelation of God's anger.

A number of years ago, Ralph L. Keiper was speaking to a loose-living California hippie about the claims of God on his life. The man was denying the existence of God and the truths of Christianity, but he was neither dull nor unperceptive. So Keiper directed him to Romans 1, which he described as an analysis of the hippie's condition. The man read it carefully and then replied, "I think I see what you're driving at. You are saying that I am the verifying data of the revelation."

That is exactly it! The present revelation of God's wrath, though limited in its scope, should be proof to us that we are indeed children of wrath and that we need to turn from our present evil path to the Savior.

Turning Aside God's Wrath

Here I return to that great Old Testament story mentioned earlier. Moses had been on the mountain for forty days, receiving the law. As the days stretched into weeks, the people waiting below grew restless and prevailed upon Moses' brother Aaron to make a substitute god for them. It was a golden calf. Knowing what was going on in the valley, God interrupted his giving of the law to tell Moses what the people were doing and to send him back down to them.

It was an ironic situation. God had just given the Ten Commandments. They had begun: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to

thousands who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:2-6). While God was giving these words, the people whom he had saved from slavery were doing precisely what he was prohibiting. Not only that, they were lying, coveting, dishonoring their parents, committing adultery, and no doubt also breaking all the other commandments.

God declared his intention to judge the people immediately and totally, and Moses interceded for them in the words referred to earlier (Exod. 32:11-12).

At last Moses started down the mountain to deal with the people. Even on a human level, quite apart from any thought of God's grace, sin must be judged. So Moses dealt with the sin as best he knew how. First he rebuked Aaron publicly. Then he called for any who still remained on the side of the Lord to separate themselves from the others and stand beside him. The tribe of Levi responded. At Moses' command they were sent into the camp to execute the leaders of the rebellion. Three thousand men were killed, approximately one-half of one percent of the six hundred thousand who had left Egypt at the Exodus (Exod. 32:28; cf. 12:37—with women and children counted, the number may have been more than two million). Moses also destroyed the golden calf. He ground it up, mixed it with water, and made the people drink it.

From a human standpoint, Moses had dealt with the sin. The leaders were punished. Aaron was rebuked. The allegiance of the people was at least temporarily reclaimed. But Moses stood in a special relationship to God, as Israel's representative, as well as to the people as their leader. And God still waited in wrath on the mountain. What was Moses to do?

For theologians sitting in an ivory-tower armchair, the idea of the wrath of God may seem to be no more than an interesting speculation. But Moses was no armchair theologian. He had been talking with God. He had heard his voice. He had receive his law. Not all the law had been given by this time, but Moses had received enough of it to know something of the horror of sin and of the uncompromising nature of God's righteousness. Had God not said, "You shall have no other gods before me"? Had he not promised to punish sin to the third and fourth

generation of those who disobey him? Who was Moses to think that the judgment *he* had imposed would satisfy a God of such holiness?

Night passed, and the morning came when Moses was to ascend the mountain again. He had been thinking, and during the night a way that might possibly divert the wrath of God had come to him. He remembered the sacrifices of the Hebrew patriarchs and the newly instituted rites of the Passover. God had shown by such sacrifices that he was prepared to accept an innocent substitute in place of the just death of the sinner. God's wrath could sometimes fall on the substitute. Moses thought, *"Perhaps God would accept...."*

When morning came, Moses ascended the mountain with great determination. Reaching the top, he began to speak to God. It must have been in great anguish, for the Hebrew text is uneven and Moses' second sentence breaks off without ending (indicated by a dash in the middle of Exod. 32:32). This is the strangled sob welling up from the heart of a man who is asking to be damned if his own judgment could mean the salvation of those he had come to love. The text reads: "So Moses went back to the LORD and said, 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Exod. 32:31-32). Moses was offering to take the place of the people and accept judgment on their behalf.

On the preceding day, before Moses had come down from the mountain, God had said something that could have been a great temptation. If Moses would agree, God would destroy the people and start again to make a new Jewish nation from Moses (Exod. 32:10). Even then Moses had rejected the offer. But, after having been with his people and being reminded of his love for them, his answer, again negative, rises to even greater heights. God had said, "I will destroy the people and save you."

Now Moses replies, "Rather destroy me and save them."

Moses lived in the early years of God's revelation and at this point probably had a very limited understanding of God's plan. He did not

know, as we know, that what he prayed for could not be. He had offered to go to hell for his people. But Moses could not save even himself, let alone Israel. He, too, was a sinner. He, too, needed a savior. He could not die for others.

But there is One who could. Thus, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). That person is Jesus, the Son of God. His death was for those who deserve God's wrath. And his death was fully adequate, because Jesus did not need to die for his own sins—he was sinless—and because, being God, his act was of infinite magnitude.

That is the message Paul will expound in this epistle. It is the Good News, the gospel. But the place to begin is not with your own good works, since you have none, but by knowing that you are an object of God's wrath and will perish in sin at last, unless you throw yourself upon the mercy of the One who died for sinners, even Jesus Christ.

Chapter 15.
Natural Revelation

Romans 1:18-20

No one likes to talk about the wrath of God, particularly if it is thought of in relation to ourselves. But if we have to think about it, as our study of Romans 1:18-20 obviously forces us to do, we find ourselves reacting generally in one of two ways. Either (1) we argue that wrath is somehow unworthy of God, a blotch on his character, and therefore a mistaken notion that should be abandoned at once by all right-thinking people; or (2) we reply by denying that we merit God's wrath, that we do not deserve it.

The second reaction is the more serious of the two. So it is the one Paul tackles in the development of his argument for the need we all have of the Christian gospel.

Romans 1:18-20 contains three important concepts, which together explain why the wrath of God against men and women is justified. The first is *wrath* itself. It is being revealed from heaven against the ungodly, Paul says. The second is the *suppression* of the truth about God by human beings, a point picked up and developed more fully in verses 21-23. The third idea is God's prior *revelation* of himself to those very people who suppress the truth about him. These concepts need to be studied in inverse order, however. For when they are considered in that order—revelation, suppression, and wrath—they teach that God has given a revelation of himself in nature sufficient to lead any right-thinking man or woman to seek him out and worship him, but that, instead of doing this, people suppress this revelation. They deny it so they do not have to follow where it leads them. It is because of this willful and immoral suppression of the truth about God by human beings that the wrath of God comes upon them.

Revelation of God in Nature

There has been so much debate about what theologians call "natural revelation" that it is important to begin a discussion of this subject with some important definitions and distinctions. First, a definition: natural revelation means what it sounds like, namely, the revelation of God in nature. It is sometimes called "general revelation," because it is available to everybody. Natural revelation is distinguished from "special revelation," which goes beyond it and is the kind of revelation we find in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the revelation of the Bible's meaning to the minds of those who read it by the Holy Spirit.

When Paul talks about a knowledge of God made plain to human beings, as he does in this text, it is the general or natural revelation, not a specific scriptural revelation, that he has in mind.

The second concept that needs to be defined here is "knowledge of God." This is necessary because we can use the words *know* or *knowledge* in different ways.

1. *Awareness.* To begin on the lowest level, when we say that we know something we can be saying only that we are aware of its existence. In this sense we can say that we know where somebody lives or that we know certain things are happening somewhere in the world. This is true knowledge, but it is not extensive knowledge. It is knowledge that affects us very little. It does not involve us personally.

2. *Knowing about.* Knowing about something goes a step further, because knowledge in this sense may be detailed, extensive, and important. This is the kind of knowledge a physicist would have of physics or a doctor of medical facts. To come more to the point, a theologian can have knowledge about God, a theology by which he might be called a very learned man—and still not be saved.

3. *Experience.* The word *know* can also be used to refer to knowledge acquired by experience. To go back to the two previous categories, we could have this kind of knowledge of where a person lives if, for example, we had actually lived in his or her home ourselves. Again, a doctor could have knowledge like this if he were actually to experience the diseases he treats or undergo the operations he performs. Knowledge of a disease by having it is obviously quite different from merely having read of its causes and symptoms and how to treat the ailment.

4. *Personal.* The last kind of knowledge is the highest and most important level. It is what we would call personal knowledge, the kind of knowing we can only have of God, of ourselves, or of another human being. When the Bible speaks of knowing God in a saving way, this is what it has in mind. It involves the knowledge of ourselves in our sin and of God in his holiness and grace. It involves the knowledge of what he has done for us in Christ for our salvation and an actual coming to know and love God through knowing Jesus Christ. It involves head knowledge, but it also involves heart knowledge. It expresses itself in piety, worship, and devotion. It is what Jesus was speaking of when he prayed, "This

> is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Some people grow impatient with definitions of this sort and wish that the teachers making them would just get on with explaining the Bible. But distinctions are necessary in this case, since they alone isolate the particular kind of knowledge of God available to men and women in nature for which God holds them accountable.

In the context of our text, this is not knowledge in the last of the four senses mentioned; if it were, all persons would be saved. Nor is it even (except in a very limited sense) knowledge about God or knowledge by experience. It is basically *awareness.* Nature reveals God is such a way that, even without the special revelation of God that we have in the Bible, all men and women are at least aware that God exists and that they should worship him. This awareness of God will not save them. But it is sufficient to condemn them if they fail to follow nature's leading, as they could and should do, and seek out the true God so revealed.

Eternal Power and Divine Nature

The apostle is precise here as he explains what the natural revelation involves. It consists of two elements: first, "God's eternal power" and, second, God's "divine nature" (v. 20). The second means quite simply that there *is* a God. In other words, people have no excuse for being atheists. The first means that the God, whom they know to exist, is all-powerful. People know this by definition, since a god who is not all-powerful is not really God. We can express these two ideas philosophically by the term "Supreme Being." "Being" (with a capital "B") refers to God's existence. "Supreme" denotes his ultimate power. What Paul is saying is that nature contains ample and entirely convincing evidence of the existence of a Supreme Being. God exists, and we know it. That is his argument. Therefore, when people subsequently refuse to acknowledge and worship God (as we do), the

problem is not in God or in a lack of evidence for his existence but in our own irrational and resolute determination not to know him.

I need to add several more important things at this point, and the first concerns the extensiveness of this nevertheless incomplete revelation. I have pointed out that the revelation of God in nature is the *limited* disclosure of God's existence and supreme power. There is no revelation of his mercy, holiness, grace, love, or the many other things necessary for us to learn if we are to know God savingly. Still, we are not to think of this limited revelation as minimal, as if somehow its limited quality alone can excuse us. According to the Bible, this natural revelation of God, though limited, is nevertheless extensive and overwhelming in its force.

In the Old Testament the great counterpart to Romans 1:18-20 is the first half of Psalm 19 (vv. 16). It speaks of the revelation of God in the heavens:

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
> Day after day they pour forth speech;
> night after night they display knowledge.
> There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.
> Their voice goes out into all the earth,
> their words to the ends of the world.
> In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
> It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

In these verses it is the "glory" or majesty of God that is said to be revealed in nature. But the emphasis here is on the universal nature of the revelation rather than on its content. It is heard in every human "speech" and "language." It is known in "all the earth" and "to the ends of the world."

Another classic Old Testament passage about natural revelation is the interrogation of Job recorded in chapters 38 and 39 of that book. God is the interrogator, and his point is that Job is far too ignorant even to question God or presume to evaluate his ways. In the context of that negative argument—"See how little you know"—God unfolds an overwhelming list of evidences for his wisdom, power, and great glory, which Job (like all people everywhere) should know and before which he should marvel:

> "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
> Tell me, if you understand.
> Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
> Who stretched a measuring line across it?
> On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—
> while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?
> "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb,
> when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness,
> when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place,
> when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?"
>
> Job 38:4-11

God's interrogation of Job goes on in that fashion for two chapters. Then, after Job responds by a confession of his own ignorance, God launches into the same type of questioning for one chapter more. These chapters stress that God is all-powerful and all-wise, and the evidence they present for these divine attributes is nature.

Kindness in Nature

There may be one other matter to be mentioned, though I must be careful not to claim too much for it here. When Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra in Lycaonia on their first missionary journey, the people wanted to worship them because they thought they were gods as a result of a miracle they did. Paul rebuked their error and began to teach them

better, in one place speaking of God's revelation of himself in nature in these words: "God... made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:15b17).

If these words are to be taken at their face value—and why should we not take them that way?— they say that God has also revealed his *kindness* in nature. Theologians call this common grace. Instead of sending us all to hell at this instant, as he has every right to do, God takes care of us in a common, general way so that most of us have food to eat, clothes to wear, and places to live. True, the evidence for common grace is not unambiguous. There are bad things in this world, too: hurricanes, terrible diseases, and so on. But generally the world is a reasonably pleasant place. So it is not only God's glory, power, and wisdom that we see in nature, according to the Bible. We see God's goodness or kindness as well, and this attribute especially increases our guilt when we refuse to seek God so that we may thank and worship him.

Awareness Within

The second idea I need to add here is that God's revelation of himself in nature does not stop with the external evidence for his existence, power, wisdom, and kindness—the attributes I have mentioned—but it has what can be called an internal or subjective element as well. That is, not only has God given evidence for his existence; he has also given us the capacity to comprehend or receive it—though we refuse to do so. The text says, "What may be known about God is *plain to them,* because *God has made it plain to them,"* and "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been *clearly* seen, being *understood* from what has been made" (vv. 19-20, italics mine).

Charles Hodge writes of these verses, "It is not of a mere external revelation of which the apostle is speaking, but of that evidence of the being and perfections of God which every man has in the constitution of

his own nature, and in virtue of which he is competent to apprehend the manifestation of God in his works."

John Calvin says that we are "blind" to God's revelation but "*not so blind* that we can plead ignorance without being convicted of perversity."

Let me use an illustration. Suppose you are driving down the street and come to a sign that says,
"Detour—Turn Left." But you ignore this and drive on. It happens that there is a police officer present, who stops you and begins to write out a ticket. What excuse might you have? You might argue that you didn't see the sign. But that would carry very little weight if the sign was well placed and in bright colors. Besides, it makes no difference. As long as you are driving the car, the responsibility for seeing the sign and obeying it is yours. What is more, you are accountable if, having ignored the sign, you recklessly race on and either harm yourself and your passengers or destroy property.

Paul's teaching fits this illustration. He is saying, first, that there is a sign. It is God's revelation of himself in nature. Second, you have "vision." Although blind to much, you can nevertheless see the revelation. Therefore, if you choose to ignore it, as we all do apart from the grace of God, the disaster that follows is your own fault. Your feelings of guilt are well founded.

Let me try this again. Paul is not saying that there is enough evidence about God in nature so that the scientist, who carefully probes nature's mysteries, can be aware of him. (Carl Sagan has done this as well as anybody, but he acknowledges no Supreme Being.) Paul is not saying that the sign is there but hidden, that we are only able to find it if we look carefully. He is saying that the sign is *plain.* It is a billboard. In fact, it is a world of billboards. No one, no matter how weak-minded or insignificant, can be excused for missing it.

There is enough evidence of God in a flower to lead a child as well as a scientist to worship him.

There is sufficient evidence in a tree, a pebble, a grain of sand, a fingerprint, to make us glorify God and thank him. This is the way to true knowledge. But people will not do this. They reject the revelation, substitute nature itself or parts of nature for God, and thereby find their hearts increasingly darkened.

John Calvin gives this just conclusion: "But although we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God, all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us. And, indeed, we are not allowed thus to pretend ignorance without our conscience itself always convicting us of both baseness and ingratitude."

Suppressing the Truth

When Calvin speaks of baseness and ingratitude, he brings us to the second point of Paul's argument in this section of Romans, the point that justifies and leads to God's wrath. We have already been talking about this. It is human rejection of the revelation God has given.

Paul's description of what people have done in regard to natural revelation is in the phrase "who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). In Greek the word translated "suppress" is *katechein*, which means "take," "hold," "hold fast," "hold back," "keep," "restrain," or "repress." In a positive sense the word can be used to mean holding to something that is good, as when Paul speaks of holding on to the word of life (cf. Phil. 2:16). In a negative sense it means wrongly to suppress something or hold it down. This is the way Paul is using it here. Thus, the newer translations of the Bible speak in Romans 1:18 of those who "suppress the truth in
unrighteousness" (NASB), "keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness" (Jerusalem Bible) or "stifle" truth (NEB). Why do we do this? It is because of our wickedness, because we prefer sin to that to which the revelation of God would take us.

This leads to the matter we are going to study in the next chapter, what R. C. Sproul has called "the psychology of atheism." It leads to an

explanation of why natural revelation by itself does not work, in the sense of actually bringing us to God.

But before we turn to that topic, I need to say that if, as Paul maintains, the revelation of God in nature is fully adequate to condemn people who do not allow it to bring them to worship and serve this true God, how much more terrible and awful is the case of the vast numbers of people, particularly in our country, who have not only the natural revelation to lead them to God but also have the Bible and the proclamation of its truths in virtually every town and hamlet of our land and (by means of radio and television) at almost any hour. "Without excuse"? The people of Rome were without excuse, and they had nothing but nature. No Bible! No churches! No preachers! What about us who have everything? If we reject what God tells us, we are a thousand times more guilty.

No excuse! "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3).

Chapter 16.
The Psychology of Atheism

Romans 1:18-20

In 1974 theologian R. C. Sproul produced a book from which I have drawn the title of this study:
The Psychology of Atheism. Sproul's book (later reissued as *If There Is a God, Why Are There Atheists?)* is an attempt to understand why people reject God either philosophically, becoming philosophical atheists, or practically, becoming practical atheists. (Practical atheists may say that they believe in God, but they "act as if" God does not exist.) Sproul's answer is that atheism has nothing to do with man's supposed ignorance of God—since all people know God, according to Romans 1—but rather with mankind's dislike of him. People do not "know" God, because they do not *want* to know him.

Sproul writes:

The New Testament maintains that unbelief is generated not so much by intellectual causes as by moral and psychological ones. The problem is not that there is insufficient evidence to convince rational beings that there is a God, but that rational beings have a natural antipathy to the being of God. In a word, the nature of God (at least the Christian God) is *repugnant* to man and is not the focus of desire or wish projection. Man's desire is not that Yahweh exists, but that he doesn't.

The Sovereign God

But why are people so determined to reject God? Up to this point we have looked at three great ideas in our study of Romans 1:18-20: (1) the *wrath* of God, which is directed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men; (2) the *suppression* by human beings of the truth about God revealed in nature; and (3) the prior *revelation* of God's eternal power and divine nature through what God has made. But we have seen that the historical sequence of these ideas is the reverse of the above listing. First, God has revealed himself. Second, people have rejected the truth thus revealed. Third, the wrath of God is released upon them because of this rejection.

Still, the question remains: Why do so-called rational beings react in what is clearly such an irrational manner? If the truth about God is as plainly understood as Romans 1:18-20 maintains it is, why should anyone suppress it? The answer, of course, is what I began to talk about in the previous chapter and am now to carry further in terms of Sproul's thesis. *Men and women reject God because they do not like him.* They may like a god of their own imagining, a god like themselves, and therefore say that they like God. But the truth is that they do not like the God who really is.

Paul's words for this universal dislike of God are "godlessness" and "wickedness" (v. 18).

"Godlessness" means that people are opposed to God. They are not like God and do not like him. "Wickedness" refers to what people do

because of this determined opposition. They reject the truth about God, thereby trying to force God away.

What is it that people do not like about God? The answer is, nearly everything. Let me show this by a look at some of the most important of God's attributes.

The first thing men and women dislike about God is his sovereignty, his most basic attribute. For if God is not sovereign, God is not God. Sovereignty refers to rule; in the case of God, it refers to the Being who is ruler over all. Sovereignty is what David was speaking about in his great prayer recorded in 1 Chronicles 29:10-13.

Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.
Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.
Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things.
In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.
Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.

God shows his sovereignty over the material order by creating it and ruling it according to his own fixed laws. Sometimes he shows his sovereignty by miracles. God shows his sovereignty over the human will and therefore also over human actions by controlling them. Thus, he hardens Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh refuses to let the people of Israel leave Egypt; and then God judges him. In a contrary way, God melts the hearts of some individuals and draws them to Jesus.

But why should the sovereignty of God be so objectionable to human beings? If we look at matters superficially, we might think that all people would quite naturally welcome God's sovereignty. "After all," we might argue, "what could be better than knowing that everything in the world is really under control in spite of appearances and that God is going to work all things out eventually?" But it is only when we look at externalities that we can think like that. When we peer below the

surface we discover that we are all in rebellion against God because of our desire for autonomy.

This was Adam's problem. It was the root sin. God had told Adam that he was to be as free as any creature in the universe could be. Adam was to rule the world for God. Moreover, he was free to go where he wished and do as he wished. He could eat whatever he wished, with one condition: As a symbol of the fact that he was not autonomous, that he was still God's creature and owed his life, health, fortune, and ultimate allegiance to God, Adam was forbidden to eat of a tree that stood in the midst of the Garden of Eden. He could eat of all the trees north of that tree, all the trees east of that tree, all the trees south of that tree, all the trees west of that tree. But the fruit of that one tree was forbidden to him, upon penalty of death. "When you eat of it you will surely die," was God's warning.

Nothing could have been more irrational than for Adam to eat of that tree. God had never lied to him, so he could believe God. Moreover, Adam owed God utter and unquestioning obedience in this and every other matter. Besides, he had been warned that if he ate he would die. There was nothing to be gained from eating! There was everything to lose! Still, as Adam looked at the tree it was a great offense to him. The tree stood for a limitation on his personal desires. It represented something he was not allowed to do. So Adam said in effect, "That tree is an offense to my autonomy. I do not care if I can eat of all the trees north of here, east of here, south of here, and west of here. As long as I allow that tree to remain untouched, I feel less than human. I feel diminished. Therefore, I am going to eat of it and die, whatever that may mean."

So Adam ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and death, the punishment for sin, came upon the race.

That is the condition of every human heart. We hate God's sovereignty because we want to be sovereign ourselves. We want to run our own lives. We want to roam free, to know no boundaries. When we discover that there are boundaries, we hate God for the discovery.

We react like the rulers of the nations in Psalm 2: "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters'" (vv. 2-3).

We say, "We will not have this God to rule over us."

The Holy God

It is not only the sovereignty of God that is repugnant to us in our natural, sinful state, however. We oppose God for his holiness as well. One reason is obvious: We hate holiness because we are not holy. God's holiness exposes our sin, and we do not like exposure. But there is more to it than that. Let me explain.

Holiness is one of the greatest of all God's attributes, the only one that is properly repeated three times over in worship statements ("Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty..." [Isa. 6:3; cf. Rev. 4:8]). We think of holiness as utter righteousness, that God does no wrong. But although holiness includes righteousness, holiness is much more than this and is not basically an ethical term at all. The basic idea of holiness is "separation." For example, the Bible is called holy (the Holy Bible), not because it is without sin, though it is inerrant, but because it is set apart and different from all other books. Religious objects are holy because they have been set apart for worship. In reference to God, holiness is the attribute that sets him apart from his creation. It has at least four elements.

1. *Majesty.* Majesty means "dignity," "authority of sovereign power," "stateliness" or "grandeur." It is the characteristic of strong rulers and of God, who is ruler over all. Majesty links holiness to sovereignty.

2. *Will.* A second element in holiness is will, the will of a sovereign personality. This makes holiness personal and active, rather than abstract and passive. Moreover, if we ask what the will of God is primarily set on, the answer is on proclaiming himself as the "Wholly Other," whose glory must not be diminished by the

disobedience or arrogance of men. This element of holiness comes close to what the Bible is speaking of when it refers to God's proper "jealousy" for his own honor. "Will" means that God is not indifferent to how men and women regard him.

3. *Wrath.* Wrath is part of holiness because it is the natural and proper stance of the holy God against all that opposes him. It means that God takes the business of being God so seriously that he will permit no other to usurp his place.

4. *Righteousness.* This is the matter mentioned earlier. It is involved in holiness not because it is the term by which holiness may most fully be understood but because it is what the holy God wills in moral areas.

Here is our problem. Precisely because holiness is not an abstract or passive concept, but is instead the active, dynamic character of God at work to punish rebellion and establish righteousness, the experience of confronting the holy God is profoundly threatening. Holiness intrigues us, as the unknown always does. We are drawn to it. But at the same time we are in danger of being undone, and we fear being undone, by the resulting confrontation. When Isaiah had his encounter with the holy God in the passage referred to above, he reacted in terror, crying, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa. 6:5).

When God revealed himself to Habakkuk, the prophet described the experience by saying, "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled..." (Hab. 3:16).

Job said, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

Peter exclaimed when he caught only a brief glimpse of Jesus' holiness, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8).

The point I am making is this: If confrontation with the holy God is an unpleasant and threatening experience for the best of people—for the saints and prophets of biblical history, for example—how much more threatening must the holiness of God be for outright and unregenerate sinners. For them the experience must be totally overwhelming. No wonder they resist God, make light of him, or deny his existence. A. W. Tozer has written, "The moral shock suffered by us through our mighty break with the high will of heaven has left us all with a permanent trauma affecting every part of our nature." Tozer is right. Therefore, the holiness of God as well as God's sovereignty drive us from him.

The Omniscient God

In his study of atheism, Sproul has a particularly good chapter on God's "omniscience." This term means that God knows everything, including ourselves and everything about us. We do not like this, as Sproul indicates. He proves his point by looking at four modern treatments of the fear of being known, even by other human beings.

The first is by Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist. Sartre has analyzed the fear of being beneath the gaze of someone else in a number of places, but the best known is in his play *No Exit.* In this play four characters are confined in a room with nothing to do but talk to and stare at each other. It is a symbol of hell. In the last lines of the play this becomes quite clear as Garcin, one of the characters, stands at the mantelpiece, stroking a bronze bust. He says:

Yes, now's the moment: I'm looking at this thing on the mantelpiece, and I understand that I'm in hell. I tell you, everything's been thought out beforehand. They knew I'd stand at the fireplace stroking this thing of bronze, with all those eyes intent on me. Devouring me. (*He swings around abruptly.*) What? Only two of you? I thought there were more; many more. (*Laughs.*) So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl." Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is—other people!

The final stage directive says that the characters slump down onto their respective sofas, the laughter dies away, and they "gaze" at each other.

The second modern treatment of the fear of being known by others is from Julius Fast's *Body Language.* This book is a study of nonverbal communication, how we express ourselves by various body positions, nods, winks, arm motions, and so forth. There is a discussion of staring, and the point is made that although it is allowable to stare at objects or animals, even for long periods of time, it is not acceptable to stare at human beings. If we do, we provoke embarrassment or hostility or both. Why? Because we associate staring with prying, and we do not want anybody prying into what we think or are.

The third modern study of the significance of the human fear of exposure is Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape.* The naked ape is, of course, the human being, the only animal who has no hair or other covering.

The fourth person whose works Sproul studies is the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. He wrote of a human need for hiddenness or solitude.

What emerges from these studies of modern attitudes toward exposure is a strange ambivalence. On the one hand, we want people to look at us, to notice us. If they ignore us, we feel diminished or hurt. At the same time, if they look too long or too intently, we are embarrassed and upset, because we are ashamed of who we are and do not want others to know us very well. If this is the case in our reaction to other human beings, who never really know us deeply even when they

pry, and who are in any case sinners like ourselves, how much more traumatic is it to be known by the omniscient God, before whom all hearts are open, all desires known?

Exposure like this is intolerable. So human beings suppress their knowledge of God—because of his omniscience as well as because of his other attributes.

The Immutable God

At the very end of Sproul's book there is a short "conclusion" in which the author tells how, after he had written the bulk of his study, he remembered a sermon by the great New England preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, entitled "Men [Are] Naturally God's Enemies." Sproul wondered how Edwards handled the subject he had been dealing with. So he hunted up the sermon and found Edwards saying that human beings hate God as "an infinitely holy, pure and righteous Being." They hate him because his omniscience is a "holy omniscience" and his omnipotence is a "holy omnipotence." So far, Edwards seemed to be making the same points Sproul was making.

Then Edwards said, "They do not like his immutability."

Immutability? thought Sproul. *Why immutability?*

Immutability means that God does not change. But why should human beings dislike that about God? Edwards explained that it is "because by this he never will be otherwise than he is, an infinitely holy God." As he thought about this, Sproul began to understand what the great theologian was saying. Men and women hate God for his immutability because it means that he will never be other than he is in all his other attributes.

If the time could come when God might cease to be sovereign, like a retiring chairman of the board, then his sovereignty would not seem particularly bad to us. We are eternal creatures. We could wait him out. When he retires, we could take over.

Again, the holiness of God would not be so offensive to us if the time might come when God would cease to be holy. What God forbids now he might someday condone. Tomorrow or next week or next month he might begin to think differently and change his mind. We could wait to do our sinning.

Omniscience? The time might come when God's memory would begin to fail and he would forget bad things he knows about us. We could live

with that.

But not if God is immutable! If God is immutable, not only is God sovereign today; God will be sovereign tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. God will always be sovereign. In the same way, not only is God holy today. God will always be holy. And not only is God omniscient today. God will always be omniscient. God will never change in any of these great attributes. He is the sovereign, holy, omniscient, and immutable God. He always will be, and there is nothing you or I or anyone else can do about it.

We may suppress the truth about God out of a wicked rejection of his sovereignty, saying, "We will not have this God to rule over us." But whether we appreciate his rule or not, God's sovereignty is precisely what we need. We need a God who is able to rule over our unruly passions, control our destructive instincts, and save us. We may hate God for his holiness. But hate him or not, we need a holy God. We need an upright standard, and we need one who will not cease from working with us until we attain it. We may hate God for his omniscience. But we need a God who knows us thoroughly, from top to bottom, and who loves us anyway. We need a God who knows what we need. We may hate God for his immutability, since he does not change in any of his other attributes. But we need a God we can count on.

Chapter 17.
Without Excuse

Romans 1:20

No human being is infinite. Infinitude belongs exclusively to God. Yet, in spite of our finite nature, human beings do seem to have an almost infinite capacity for some things. One of them is for making excuses for reprehensible behavior. Accuse a person of something, and regardless of how obvious the fault may be, the individual immediately begins to make self-serving declarations: "It wasn't my fault," "Nobody told me," "My intentions were good," "You shouldn't be so critical." The two least

spoken sentences in the English language are probably "I was wrong" and "I am sorry."

Some people try to brazen things out by denying the need to make excuses. Walt Whitman once wrote, "I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood." The French have a saying that has a similar intent: "*Qui s'excuse, s'accuse*" ("He who excuses himself, accuses himself"). But that is an excuse itself, since it means that the person involved is too great to need to make apologies.

Our text says that in spite of our almost infinite capacity to make excuses, we are all "without excuse" for our failure to seek out, worship, and thank the living God.

"I Didn't Know God Existed"

The first of our excuses is that we do not know that God exists or at least that we do not know for sure. Every era has had its characteristic excuses for failure to seek and worship God, but in our "scientific age," this is certainly a very common rationalization. We remember that when the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin returned to earth from his short time in space, he said with typical atheistic arrogance, "I did not see God." The fact that he could not see God was supposed to be proof of God's nonexistence. Unfortunately, what Gagarin said is typical of many millions of people in our time, both in the communist East and the capitalistic West. It is the argument that science either has disproved God or else has been unable to give adequate evidence for affirming his existence.

It should be clear by this point, however, that if the Bible is from God, as Christians claim, then whatever *we* may think about the matter, God at least does not agree with our assessment. We say, "There is no evidence for God." Or, "There is insufficient evidence for God."

God says that quite the contrary is the case. God says that nature supplies evidence that is not only extensive but is also "clearly seen" and fully "understood." In other words, there is no excuse for atheism.

The alternative put forward today is that the universe is eternal because matter is eternal, and that all we see has come about over a long period of time as the result of chance or random occurrences. This is the view of Carl Sagan, who affirms the eternity of matter. "In the beginning was the cosmos," cries Sagan. But think through the problems. Suppose everything we see did evolve over long periods of time from mere matter. Suppose our complex universe came from something less complex, and that less complex something from something still less complex. Suppose we push everything back until we come to "mere matter," which is supposed to be eternal. Have we solved our problem? Not at all! We are trying to explain the complex forms of matter as we know them today, but where did those forms come from? Some would say that the form or purpose we see was somehow in matter to begin with. But, if that is the case, then the matter we are talking about is no longer "mere matter." It already has purpose, organization, and form, and we need to ask how these very significant elements got there. At some point we must inevitably find ourselves looking for the Purposer, Organizer, or Former.

Moreover, it is not just form that confronts us. There are personalities in the cosmos. We are personalities. We are not mere matter, even complex matter. We have life, and we know ourselves to be entities possessing a sense of self-identity, feelings, and a will. Where could those things come from in an originally impersonal universe? Francis Schaeffer has written, "The assumption of an impersonal beginning can never adequately explain the personal beings we see around us, and when men try to explain man on the basis of an original impersonal, man soon disappears."

Until recently, the most popular fallback from these truths has been the argument that whatever the difficulties may be for supposing an evolution of what we see from mere matter, such is nevertheless possible, given an infinite amount of time and chance occurrence. But there are two problems here.

First, what is chance? People talk as if chance were an entity that could bring about the universe. But chance is merely a mathematical

abstraction with no real existence. Suppose you are about to flip a coin and were to ask, "What are the chances of its coming up heads?" The answer is fifty percent (ignoring the possibility that it may stick in the mud on its side). Suppose further that you do flip the coin and that it comes up heads. What made it come up heads? Did chance do it? Of course not. What made it come up heads was the force of your thumb on the coin, the weight of the coin, the resistance of the air, the distance from your hand to the ground, and other variables. If you knew and could plot every one of those variables, you would be able to tell exactly what would happen—whether the coin would land either heads or tails. You do not know the variables. So you say, "Chances are that it will come up heads fifty percent of the time." But the point I am making is that chance didn't do it. Chance is nothing. So to say that the universe was created by chance is to say that the universe was created by nothing, which is a meaningless statement.

What about there being an infinite amount of time? As I have pointed out, even with an infinite amount of time nothing with form or purpose comes into being apart from an original Former or Purposer. But supposing it could. Even this does not explain the universe, for the simple reason that the universe has not been around for an infinite amount of time. Science itself tells us that the universe is in the nature of fifteen to twenty billion years old. It speaks of an original beginning known popularly as the Big Bang. True, fifteen to twenty billion years is a long time, more time than we can adequately comprehend. But such time is not infinite! That is the point. And if it is not infinite, then an appeal to infinity does not explain the existence of our very complex universe.

"I didn't know God existed"? Can anyone really affirm that in face of the evidence for the existence of God in nature? The Bible says we cannot, and even a secular analysis of the options supports the Bible's statement. Ignorance is no excuse for failing to seek and worship God, *because we are not ignorant.*

"I Have Too Many Questions"

There are people who might follow what I have said to this point and even agree with most of it but who would nevertheless excuse themselves on the ground that they still have too many questions about Christianity. They recognize that the God we are talking about is not just "any god" but the God who has revealed himself in Scripture. And when they think about that they have a host of questions. They suppose that these are valid excuses for their rejection of the deity. For example:

1. *What about the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard of Christ?* Every preacher gets asked this question. In fact, it is probably the question most asked by Christians and nonChristians alike. But it is also true that Romans 1:18-20, the text we have been studying, answers it. The implication behind this question is that the "innocent" native is going to be sent to hell for failing to do something he has never had an opportunity to do, namely, believe on Jesus Christ as his Savior, and that a God who would be so unjust as to condemn the "innocent" native cannot be God. And that is true! God must be just, and God would be unjust if he condemned a person for failing to do what he or she obviously did not have the opportunity of doing.

But that is not the case in regard to the so-called innocent in Africa. To be sure, the native is innocent of failing to believe on Jesus if he or she has never heard of Jesus. But it is not for this that the native or anyone else who has not heard of Jesus is condemned. As Romans 1 tells us, the native is condemned for failing to do what he or she actually knows he or she should do, that is, seek out, worship, and give thanks to the God revealed in nature. Everyone falls short there. A person might argue that the native actually does seek God, offering in proof the widespread phenomenon of religion in the world. Man has rightly been called *homo religiosus*. But that is no excuse either, for the universality of religion, as Paul is going to show in the next verses, is actually evidence of man's godlessness. Why? Because the religions that man creates are actually attempts to escape having to face the true God. We invent religion—not because we are seeking God, but because we are running away from him.

To repeat what we have seen in the last two studies: (1) all human beings know God as a result of God's revelation of himself to us through nature, but (2) instead of allowing that revelation to lead us to God, we repress the revelation and instead set up false gods of our own imaginations to take the true God's place. The reason, as we have also seen, is that (3) we do not like the God to which this natural revelation leads us.

2. *Isn't the Bible full of contradictions*? This is an excuse we also often hear, but it is as unsubstantial as the first one. We are told that as the data from science has come in, so many errors have been found in the Bible that no rational person could possibly believe that it is God's true revelation. It follows that at best the Bible is a collection of insightful human writings, so no one can intelligently buy into Christianity on the basis of the biblical "revelation."

The problem with this argument is its premise. It assumes that the accumulation of historical and scientific facts has uncovered an increasing number of textual and other problems, but actually the opposite is the case. As the data has come in over the decades, particularly over the last few decades, the tendency is for the Bible to be vindicated. *Time* magazine recognized this in a cover story in the December 30, 1974, issue. The story was captioned "How True Is the Bible?" In this essay the magazine's editors examined the chief radical critics of the recent past—Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and others—but concluded:

The breadth, sophistication and diversity of all this biblical investigation are impressive, but it begs a question: Has it made the Bible more credible or less? Literalists who feel the ground move when a verse is challenged would have to say that credibility has suffered. Doubt has been sown, faith is in jeopardy. But believers who expect something else from the Bible may well conclude that its credibility has been enhanced. After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest

scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege.

Even on the critics' own terms—historical fact—the scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.

It is hard to see how anyone can use the alleged "contradictions" in the Bible to justify a failure to seek out and worship the Bible's God, especially after he or she has investigated the evidence thoroughly.

3. *If there is a God and the God who exists is a good God, why does he tolerate evil?* The argument has two forms. One form is philosophical, asking how evil could have entered a world created and ruled by a benevolent God. The other is personal and practical, asking why things happen to me that I do not like or why God does not give me what I ask him for or do what I tell him in my prayers I want him to do.

The philosophical problem is difficult. If we ask how evil could originate in an originally perfect world, there is no one, so far as I know, who has ever answered that puzzle adequately. If God made all things good, including Adam and Eve, so that nothing within them naturally inclined toward evil in any way, then it is difficult (if not impossible) to see how Adam or Eve or any other perfect being could do evil. But I must point out that although Christians may not have an adequate explanation for the origin of evil (at least at this point in the history of theological thought), our difficulty here is at least only half as great as that of the unbeliever. For the unbeliever has the problem not only of explaining the origin of evil; he has the problem of explaining the origin of the good as well. In any case, our failure to understand how evil came about does not disprove its existence any more than it disproves the existence of God.

The second form of this problem is personal and practical. It is the form of the question that probably troubles most people: "Why does God tolerate evil, particularly in my life? Why do bad things happen to me? Why doesn't God answer my prayers as I would like?"

Part of the answer to this problem is that if we got what we deserved, we would be suffering not merely the evils we now know but rather those eternal torments that are to be the lot of the unregenerate in hell. In other words, instead of saying, "Why do bad things happen to me?" we should be saying, "Why do good things happen to me?" All we deserve is evil. If our life has any good in it, that good (however minimal) should point us to the God from whom all good comes. That we do not follow that leading, but instead complain about God's treatment, only increases our guilt. It shows us to be precisely what Paul declares we are in Romans 1:18: godless and wicked.

Let me illustrate how this works. After I had preached the sermon that is printed as chapter 16 of this volume ("The Psychology of Atheism"), I received an unsigned note in which someone objected to my comments about the natural man's hatred of God's sovereignty. He (or she) said, "Preach sermons to your congregation, not to the radio audience. Deal with the hard questions.
The difficulty is not that I am not sovereign but that the sovereignty of God does not seem good. When the answers to my prayers seem to make no sense, what then am I to think of God? Deal with that one."

The tone of this note was a bit insulting, as you can see. But the problem is not that it was insulting to me. The problem is that it was insulting to God. Moreover, it was itself a refutation of the point it was making. The questioner was saying that he or she had no difficulty with the concept of God's sovereignty, only with what God does—if God exists. But, of course, what is that if not a challenge to God's sovereignty? It is a way of saying, "God, I am not going to believe in you unless you come down from your lofty throne, stand here before little me and submit to my interrogation. I will not acknowledge you unless you explain yourself to me." Could anything be more arrogant than that? To demand that God justify his ways to us? Or even to think that we could understand him if he did? Job was not challenging God's sovereignty. He was only seeking understanding. But when God interrogated him, asking if he could explain how God created and

sustains the universe, poor Job was reduced to near stammering. He said, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

It is interesting that the same week in which I got this note, demanding that God explain himself on our level before we believe on him, I got another letter that was quite different. This person described a particularly horrible week that he had just gone through. But then he said, "Seeing the situation in the light of God's sovereignty made it possible for me to ask forgiveness for my anger and open my eyes to what God wants me to see, namely, that my life will frequently be 'disordered,' but he will never let it get out of control." Do you see the difference?

Is it right to have questions about why God acts as he does? Of course! Who has not had them? It is right to believe and then seek understanding. But to use an inability to understand some things as an excuse for failing to respond to what we do know is that deliberate repression of the truth about which Paul was speaking in our text.

"I Didn't Think It Was Important"

The weakest excuse that anyone can muster is the statement that "I just didn't think it was important." That is obviously faulty—if God exists and we are all destined to meet him and give an account of our actions some day. Nothing can be as important as getting the most basic of our relationships right: the relationship of ourselves to God. And yet, for one reason or another— perhaps just because the press of life's many demands seems more important—we push this greatest of all issues aside.

How do you think that is going to sound when you appear before God at the last day?

"I didn't think it was important"?

"I didn't think *you* were important"?

"I didn't think my repression of the truth about you mattered"?

A little later on in Romans, Paul tells what is going to happen in that last day. Men and women are going to appear before God with their excuses, but when they do, says Paul, "Every mouth [will] be silenced and the whole world [will be] held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:20). Even in this day there are no valid excuses, as Paul declares in Romans 1:20. But in *that* day the excuses will not even be spoken, so obvious will it be that all human beings—from the smallest to the greatest—are guilty of godlessness.

Since today is not yet that final day, there is still time to turn from the arrogance that pits finite minds and sinful wills against God.

Do you remember Methuselah? He lived longer than any other man—969 years. His name means "When he is gone it shall come." "It" was the great flood of God's judgment. That flood destroyed the antediluvian world. But the reason I refer to Methuselah and his longevity is that he is a picture of God's great patience with those who sin against him. During the early years of Methuselah's life God sent a preacher named Enoch to turn the race from its sin. Enoch preached that judgment was coming: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (Jude 1415). After Enoch died, Noah continued the preaching. For the entire lifetime of Methuselah, all 969 years, the flood did not come. God was gracious, "patient... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). But, though patient, God was not indifferent to sin, and at last Methuselah died, and wrath did indeed come.

We live in a similar age today. Today is the day of God's grace. But wrath is gathering. We see it about us like the rising waters of the flood. Do not wait to be overtaken by it. Do not make excuses. Admit that you are "without excuse" in God's sight and quickly take refuge in the Savior.

Chapter 18.
Base Ingratitude

Romans 1:21

In many Bibles the twenty-first verse of Romans 1 begins a new paragraph, and rightly so. In the previous verses Paul has explained the fearful state of men and women as exposed to the wrath of Almighty God, and he has explained why this is our condition. We are objects of God's wrath because we have rejected the knowledge of God, which all persons possess as a result of God's extensive disclosure of himself in the works of nature. Now Paul is going to take that description of the human race further by showing the sad results for man of this rejection.

Yet the paragraphs are also tied together. This is because Paul does not immediately speak of the results of our rejection of God, which is his ultimate purpose. Instead he first cites two more things of which sinful men and women are guilty. This means that there are three failures in all, one of which we have already studied and two additional ones added here. First, we have *suppressed the truth about God*, being unwilling to come to God to whom the revelation in nature leads. (This is the sin studied in detail in the last chapter.) Second, we have *refused to glorify (or worship) God.* This is in spite of our genuine knowledge of him. Third, we *have forgotten to be thankful* To know God is to know ourselves as his creatures and thus to know that all we have and enjoy is from him. Yet, because we willingly block the knowledge of God from our minds, we thus obviously also refuse to glorify God *as* God and are ungrateful.

Ungrateful! John Milton spoke of "base ingratitude" (*Comus*, line 776). William Shakespeare wrote, "Blow, blow thou winter wind; thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude" (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7). The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky said of man, "If he is not stupid, he is monstrously ungrateful! Phenomenally ungrateful. In fact, I believe that the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped."

No Praise, No Glory

There is a connection between these three human failures, however. So to understand the nature of our ingratitude to God, we need first to understand that we have not "gloried him as God," which is how Paul states it.

The word *glory,* from which the words *glorify* and *glorification* derive, is quite interesting. In the Greek language the original words are *dokeo* (the verb) and *doxa* (the noun), from which we get our word *doxology.* Originally the verb meant "to appear" or "to seem," and the noun that came from this then meant an "opinion." A person's opinion of someone or something is how that person or thing appears to the one observing it. From *doxa* we get our English words *orthodox* (which means a "straight or correct opinion"), *heterodox* (which means a "different or wrong opinion") and *paradox* (which means a "contrary or irreconcilable opinion"). At one time *doxa* and *dokeo* were concerned with either a good opinion or a bad opinion about someone. But eventually they came to refer to a good opinion only. At this point the noun came to mean the "praise" or "honor" due to one about whom such good opinions were held, and the verb referred to rendering an individual such honor. Kings possessed "glory" because they merited the praise of their subjects. The word is used in this sense in Psalm 24, which speaks of God as the King of glory: "Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory" (v. 10).

At this point it is easy to see the effect of using the word *glory* or *glorify* of God. Who can
"glorify" God? Obviously, only one who has a right opinion about him, that is, one who knows and properly appreciates God's attributes. The one who knows God as sovereign, holy, omniscient, immutable, loving, merciful, and so on—and who praises the Almighty for these things—glorifies him.

And there is this, too: The English language has another entirely different word that means almost the same thing as "glory" and that might well have been used for it had not the French word *gloire*

superseded it in everyday speech. This is the Anglo-Saxon word *worth*, which also refers to a person's intrinsic merit or character. Man's worth is man's character. God's worth is God's glory. Now, using this term, what happens when you acknowledge God's character as he himself reveals it? Well, you acknowledge his "worth-ship," or, as we say, you "worship" him. "Worth-ship" is hard for us to say. So either we shorten it and speak of "worshiping" God, or we abandon the Anglo-Saxon term and switch to the Latin word and speak of "glorifying" God instead.

The point I am making is that each of these three ideas is the same. Linguistically, the *worship* of God, the *praise* of God, and the *giving of glory* to God are identical.

Of course, this is precisely what Paul says the human race has not done. Moreover, its failure to worship or glorify God follows naturally from its willful suppression of the truth about God, which God has revealed to us in nature. We have already seen that we reject the things God has revealed because we do not like the God to which the truth about God leads us. We do not like him for his sovereignty; God's sovereignty negates our autonomy. We do not like him for his holiness; God's holiness opposes and condemns our sin. We do not like him for his omniscience; his omniscience terrifies us because we fear exposure. We do not like God for his immutability, because immutability means that God will never be other than he is in all his other attributes. We cannot stand these truths. So we repress them, denying their existence. It is obvious that if we do this, we are not going to praise God for these same characteristics.

On the contrary, we do what the Jews did when they had been brought out of Egypt but had rebelled against God by making the golden calf. We take the attributes that belong to God only and ascribe them to idols, saying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exod. 32:8). We are going to examine how we do that in greater detail as we study the latter half of Romans 1.

Not Thankful

There are times in my study of the major Bible commentators when I am seriously disappointed, and this is one of them. For the third great failure for which Paul cites the human race is ingratitude—"nor gave thanks," he says—and yet this important idea receives very little treatment by these commentators. Haldane, great in nearly all respects as a commentator, gives just nine lines to this matter. Godet has five lines. Even John Calvin says only, "It is not without reason that Paul adds that *neither gave* they *thanks,* for there is no one who is not indebted to God's infinite kindnesses, and even on this account alone he has abundantly put us in his debt by condescending to reveal himself to us."

In working on this idea I was therefore pleased to discover that in his book on "doubt," entitled *In Two Minds,* the British writer Os Guinness (now living in America) devotes an entire chapter to ingratitude, viewing it rightly, I believe, as a major cause for doubt and thus as a step away from faith toward failure.

Guinness's thesis is that doubt is not unbelief but rather a middle place between faith and unbelief, hence his title. But that middle position is an unstable one. If we are doubting, we will not merely doubt for long. Either we will move from doubt in the direction of a stronger faith, or we will move from doubt in the direction of unbelief. And whether we do one or the other depends on how we deal with what causes us to be unsettled. Guinness sees the causes of our unsettling as: ingratitude, a faulty view of God, weak foundations, lack of commitment, lack of growth, unruly emotions, and fearing to believe. He calls them "seven families of doubt." Ingratitude is the cause of doubt he starts with.

Why is ingratitude so dangerous? Because it is based upon a willful unawareness of the most basic facts about God and upon our lack of a proper relationship to him. In other words, it is because of the very problem about which Paul is teaching.

Romans 1:18-20 teaches that the existence of God is abundantly disclosed in nature. This means, of course, not merely that God exists but also that all we are, see, and have has been brought into being by

him. He is the Creator of everything. So if we have life, it is from God. If we have health, it is from God. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the friends we share—everything good is from God. If we fail to be grateful for this, it is because we are not really acknowledging him or are rejecting a proper relationship to him. Someone may say, "But we sometimes experience bad things, too. We suffer pain and hunger. We get sick. Eventually we die." But even here we show our ingratitude. For we deny the fact that if we got what we deserve, we would all be in hell, sinners that we are. Our very existence, as sinners, should cause us to praise God not only for his sovereignty, holiness, omniscience, and all the other attributes I have mentioned, but for his abundant mercy, too. But we are not conscious of this. So we erect a great mass of ingratitude upon our earlier sins of suppressing the truth and refusing God worship.

Guinness refers to Romans 1:21 as a sober reminder that "rebellion against God does not begin with the clenched fist of atheism but with the self-satisfied heart of the one for whom 'thank you' is redundant."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who spends a little more time on ingratitude than the other commentators, writes:

Man does not thank God for his mercy, for his goodness, for his dealings with us in providence. We take the sunshine for granted; we are annoyed if we do not get it. We take the rain for granted. How often do we thank God for all these gifts and blessings!... God is "the giver of every good and perfect gift"; he is "the Father of mercies." Yet people go through the whole of their lives in this world and they never thank him; they ignore him completely. That is how they show their attitude toward God. In this way they suppress the truth that has been revealed concerning [him].

Remember and Give Thanks

Guinness's chapter on ingratitude makes another important contribution, and that is its emphasis on the biblical theme of "remembering to give thanks." This has "tremendous emphasis," he says. "The man or woman

of faith is the one who gives thanks. Unbelief, on the other hand, has a short and ungrateful memory."

When the people of Israel left Egypt to travel to the Promised Land, they were the recipients of many great blessings. They had been delivered from slavery, protected from Pharaoh's pursuing armies, provided with water to drink and manna to eat, and they were given guidance in the form of the great cloud that covered them by day to protect them from the sun's fierce heat and turned into a pillar of fire by night to provide both light and warmth. If ever a people should have been fervently grateful to God, it was this people. Yet they were not grateful. They had asked for freedom. But when they received it and found that it was not precisely to their liking, they wanted to lynch Moses, turn around, and go back to Egypt. When they were given manna, they cried out for a different diet. No matter what God did, there was always something else they wanted.

Moses knew where such ingratitude would lead. He knew they would be made rebellious by ingratitude. So this great leader constantly reminded the Jewish people of their past, of God's blessings to them, and of their need to be thankful. After they had been delivered from Pharaoh's pursuing armies, Moses composed a song that said:

I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted.
The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him....

Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?

Exodus 15:1-2, 11

Moses wanted Israel to remember God's past blessings. Later when God gave the Ten
Commandments and other portions of the law, Moses said, "Be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of

the land of slavery" (Deut. 6:12).

David, too, was strong on the need to be thankful, and he wrote much about it. After the ark of the covenant had been brought back to Jerusalem, David wrote a psalm beginning: "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done" (1 Chron. 16:8; cf. Ps. 105:1). David also said, "I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you" (Ps. 35:18). In the same way, Psalms 106, 107, 118, and 136 begin with thanksgiving: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever." Psalm 100, titled "A Psalm. For giving thanks," says:

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.
Know that the LORD is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.
For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

What was true for those living in the time of the Old Testament is true also for those living in New Testament times. When Jesus healed the ten lepers, only one of them came back, after showing himself to the priests, and thanked Jesus. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:17-18). Jesus seemed to be bothered by the others' ingratitude. Similarly, Paul emphasized thanksgiving in his commands to the Philippians about prayer, saying, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving,* present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7, italics mine). Paul was concerned that in making new requests of God (which is proper) we nevertheless remember to thank him for what we have already received.

The point I am making is that thankfulness is a mark of those who truly know God—even though we sometimes forget to be thankful. Ingratitude, by contrast, is the mark of those who repress the truth about him.

Are We Thankful?

Although this section is a study of the psychology and acts of those who are in rebellion against
God—the focus of Romans 1:18-32—all of it clearly has bearing on those who profess to know God. There are two pertinent questions: Are we who know God thankful? *and* Do we express our thanks verbally?

It is interesting to note that in many of the world's languages "giving thanks" is the basic meaning of at least one word for prayer. A very important Greek word for prayer is *eucharisteo*, from which is derived the liturgical word *Eucharist.* The Eucharist is the Lord's Supper, and it refers to that aspect of the communion service that involves thanksgiving to God for Christ's atoning death. *Eucharisteō* means "to give thanks." One of the most important Latin words for prayer is *gratia*, from which we have derived the French and English words *grace.* It has two meanings. On the one hand, it means God's "unmerited favor." That is the most common meaning of the word in English. It is the meaning in the hymn "Amazing Grace." But *gratia* also means "thanksgiving," the meaning we retain when we speak of saying "grace" before a meal.

Isn't it interesting that so many of these words for prayer mean thanksgiving? Isn't it significant that the chief element in the opening of the heart of man to God in prayer should be gratitude?

Yet how little this is actually the case! We pray, but our prayers are often only versions of "God bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more. Amen."

Or they are strings of requests: "Give me this, give me that; do it quickly, and that's that."

Our prayers should follow the order of that little prayer acrostic ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and (only then) Supplication. We should ask for things only after we have already thanked God for what he has given.

What a difference it would make if we would all actually learn to glorify and worship God and be thankful! I think Reuben A. Torrey wrote wisely when he said:

Returning thanks for blessings already received increases our faith and enables us to approach God with new boldness and new assurance. Doubtless the reason so many have so little faith when they pray is because they take so little time to meditate upon and thank God for blessings already received. As one meditates upon the answers to prayers already granted, faith waxes bolder and bolder, and we come to feel in the very depths of our souls that there is nothing too hard for the Lord.

This is what Os Guinness is saying, too! Doubt is the middle position between faith and unbelief. But if we learn to thank God for who he is and for his many blessings, we inevitably move from doubt to faith, rather than from doubt to even greater rebellion.

Chapter 19.
Fools!

Romans 1:21-23

I have often spoken of the rebellion of the first man and woman against God, pointing out that, although the woman was deceived by Satan, having been led to think that her disobedience would result in good both for herself and her husband, the man was not deceived and therefore knew what he was doing. Adam deliberately set his face against God. He said in effect, "As long as that tree is in the middle of the garden of Eden and I am not able to eat of it, I feel demeaned as a human being. I am not autonomous. So I am going to eat of it and die, whatever that

may be." Because he understood what he was doing, Adam's sin was greater than Eve's.

Yet there was a measure of "deception" in Adam's case also—deliberate deception. For how else can we explain what Adam did? Adam was no ignoramus. He knew that he was rebelling against God and that he was rejecting the truth about himself and the world, which God had revealed. What did Adam think he was going to put in the place of God and God's truth? In place of God, he wanted to put himself! That much is obvious. In place of the truth, he no doubt wanted to put a "truth" of his own making!

This is what Satan had actually offered Eve earlier. When she replied to the serpent—the great deceiver—about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, saying that she and her husband were not to eat of it or touch it lest they die, Satan had declared, "You will not surely die.... For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Ah, "like God!" That was what Eve and Adam wanted to become. God is the sovereign God, and one aspect of his sovereignty is that he makes the rules. Adam wanted to make his own rules. He wanted to say what was to be true and what was to be false. And yet, in rebelling against God, he became anything but sovereign or wise. He became the opposite, losing what strength and wisdom he had. Instead of becoming more like God, which Satan had promised the woman, Adam became like Satan. Instead of rewriting the truth so that it would better suit his own warped desires, Adam began a process in which he and the human race after him turned from the truth of God to lies.

Substitution and Moral Foolishness

What happened to Adam back in the earliest moments of earth's history is what Paul declares in Romans 1 to be true now of every human being. Our study of Romans 1:18-21 has shown what human beings have done in terms of their relationships to God. They have (1) suppressed the truth about God; (2) refused to glorify, or worship, God; and (3) neglected to be thankful. Because of the first and perhaps also

because of the second and third of these transgressions, the wrath of God has already begun to come upon them.

But the problem not only involves people's relationships to God. It also involves what happens to them as a secondary result of their breaking of the ties that should exist between this holy and loving Creator and his rational creatures. When Adam rebelled against God it was not only his relationship to God that was broken. His relationship to Eve was broken also, and this, too, was to affect the history of mankind. Adam acted the fool, and he became one. So also with the race as a whole. Thus, having spoken of that cosmic rebellion by which the human race has set its face against God, Paul goes on to declare, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (vv. 21-23). According to these words, the first result of man's rebellion against God, so far as he himself is concerned, is that he became a fool. His heart was darkened.

The words in this paragraph are wonderfully expressive and deserve careful attention. I start with three that are related.

1. *Dialogismois*. This is the word translated "thinking" in the New International Version, "imaginations" in the King James Version, and "argumentations" in J. B. Phillips's paraphrase. It refers to the working of the human mind apart from revelation. We have it in our word *dialogue.* The point is that, having rejected the truth about God that God has revealed to all human beings in nature (and later through Jesus Christ and the Bible), human beings have been left to their own mental devices, which are, however, inadequate for working out or discovering reality. We will not have God. So, having rejected God, we can use our minds only to rearrange error.

2. *Sophoi*. This word is translated "wise" in most Bible versions, but its force comes from its use in words like sophistry, sophisticated,

sophomore, philosophy, philosopher, and philosophical. A philosopher is one who loves wisdom. A sophisticate thinks himself to be very worldly-wise. This is what those who have rejected the truth about God imagine themselves to have become. It is what Adam imagined he had become. In ourselves we think that we are all very intelligent and sophisticated individuals.

Let me quote D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this point:

Instead of accepting revelation they became philosophers. And what is a philosopher? A philosopher is a man who claims that he starts by being skeptical about everything, that he is an agnostic. "I am going to have the data," he says, "and then I am going to apply my mind to it. I am going to reason it out and I am going to work it out." And that is exactly what such men have done; they became foolish and wicked in their reasonings, in their thoughts, in their own conjectures and speculations and surmisings. And what is the cause of it all? Paul uses the word "vain" and it means not only foolish, but it means wicked as well.... The cause of the whole trouble was wickedness, and it is still wickedness.

Paul's point is that such persons are not being honest with the data they claim to be treating, and the reason they are not honest with the data is that they do not like the direction to which the data points them. Therefore, instead of using their minds to recognize and pursue the truth, they use them to provide philosophical justifications for their actions.

3. *Emōranthēsan*. This is a long Greek word, but it is derived from a very simple root found within it: *mōros*, which means "fool." It is used in the sentence, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" (v. 22).

What kind of fools? Well, in the Greek language, "fool" does not mean merely to be guilty of intellectual folly, though it includes this error, but to be guilty of moral folly or wickedness as well. That is why in the Bible it is so often connected with a denial of the existence of God, as in Psalm 14:1 ("The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'"). It is why

it is such a reprehensible term (cf. Matt. 5:22). If "fool" referred only to a deficiency of intellect, it could hardly be a bad thing, at least in terms of our relationship to God. None of us can ever know God fully; he is infinitely above us. But if the word includes a moral or ethical element, as it does, then it is truly bad, for it refers to our willful rejection of whatever truth about God we are capable of receiving.

This compounds our guilt, for it adds the sin of hypocrisy to the prior sin of rebellion. We have rebelled against God by rejecting the knowledge about himself that he has revealed to us. In addition to that, while willfully scorning the truth, we make exalted but ridiculous claims to great wisdom.

The Downward Sliding Path

Beginning in verse 24, Paul is going to show that turning away from God launched the race upon a downward path, leading inevitably to great moral depravity. We are going to look at that aspect of the slide of the human race in detail when we come to those verses. But even here it is important to see that what is involved is a falling away from a high level of truth, received by revelation, and not an upward climb to it.

It is important to see this, because the world believes exactly the opposite. It tries to teach that the path of the race has been consistently upward from its original "animal" beginnings and that our present world religions or philosophies are a step upward from whatever religious sensibilities went before them. We have been taught that primitive ages of the race were marked by animism and that animism progressed upward to polytheism, which in turn produced monotheism.

But this is not the way it happened. Some years ago a student of comparative religions named Robert Brow published a book entitled *Religion: Origins and Ideas* in which he argued correctly that this popular theory of evolutionary religious development simply does not fit the facts. On the contrary, he argued, the work of anthropologists suggests that the original form of religion was monotheism and that the polytheistic or animistic religions we see today among certain

"primitive" peoples are actually a falling away from that much higher standard. Brow wrote, "Research suggests that the tribes are not animistic because they have continued unchanged since the dawn of history. Rather, the evidence indicates degeneration from a true knowledge of God."

In his reconstruction Brow argues that an early knowledge of the true God came first, accompanied by animal sacrifices that were a way of acknowledging that the worshiper had offended God and needed to make atonement for his or her offenses. In time polytheism entered, providing a pantheon of gods and goddesses who were worshiped not because they were imagined to be higher or greater than the original true God but because they were lesser and therefore less to be feared. At this point priests emerged to take over the functions of sacrifice, and the religions degenerated even further. So it has continued. According to Brow, the so-called primitive tribesman is actually closer to the truth of religion than our civilized and sophisticated contemporaries.

If this is true, as the Bible also declares it to be, then our pretension to progress in religion is only another sharp example of our great wickedness and inordinate folly. Claiming to be wise, we have become fools. For what could be more foolish than to have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God" for gods of our own devising?

Trauma, Repression, Substitution

In the midst of these important verses, Paul introduces another word that is extremely significant for understanding the nature of nonbiblical religions and the human psychology that has produced them. This is the word *exchanged*. It occurs in the verses we are studying, where Paul says, "... [they] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (v. 23). Two verses further on it occurs again: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen" (v. 25).

This word explains why the human race has been so determined to invent religions to replace worship of the one true God. It explains it by a term we in our day are particularly well equipped to understand.

In psychology there is a recognized sequence of common human experiences known as *trauma, repression,* and *substitution.* Here is an example of the way these concepts are used: Suppose that a certain man is having difficulty concentrating on his work and that he cannot sleep at night. Not knowing what is wrong, he goes to a psychiatrist for help. "I can't seem to concentrate," he says. "I like my job. I am not particularly pressured by it. But I am not doing well, and at night I can't sleep. Something is wrong. I don't know what it is. Can you help me?" The psychiatrist says he will try. So he asks the man to tell something about himself. When was the first time he noticed being unable to concentrate? What was his life like at that time? How was his relationship with his wife? How was his relationship with his children? How have things been at home? Did anything happen at that time that might have upset him?

Suppose that during these exploratory sessions, the psychiatrist notices that every time he mentions the house in which this man lives, the man's brow furrows and his answers to the therapist's questions get shorter. This happens a number of times, and eventually the psychiatrist, who is trained to observe such things, asks, "Did anything bad ever happen to your home? Do you have any bad memories about it?"

The man furrows his brow again and says, "No." "Are you sure there isn't something bothering you about it?" The man assures the doctor that there is nothing. Nevertheless, as the doctor probes this area he discovers that about the time the man began to have trouble with his job, his house was burglarized one evening, and both he and his wife were threatened by the burglar. Suppose in addition that the psychiatrist discovers that the robber was never caught, that the man has installed the most sophisticated burglary devices, and that he is constantly calling home. When these facts emerge it is not hard for the psychiatrist to explain what has happened. The robbery and the threat to his wife were so traumatic to this man that ever since he has been worried that another

robbery (or something worse) might occur. The man has not admitted these fears to himself. In fact, he has repressed the experience, perhaps because he thinks he is not supposed to show such unmanly emotions as fear. But the trauma is with him, and his inability to concentrate at work is one evidence that the problem has never been dealt with adequately. To do so the psychiatrist will get the man to talk about his experience, face up to his fears and try to work with them.

What the man has experienced are the three stages of trauma, repression, and substitution, which I mentioned earlier. The robbery was so traumatic that the man repressed his memories of it. But the trauma did not go away. The memory of the event was only repressed. So a set of unnatural behavioral patterns emerged to fill the void.

This is precisely what Paul says has happened to the human race. Because of our primitive break with God in Adam and the resulting sinful state in which we live, whenever we experience the revelation of God in nature (or in Jesus Christ, the Bible, Christian preaching, or whatever), we find echoes of the original trauma emerging and inevitably attempt to repress them. But we cannot erase the trauma, and an act of substitution takes place by which we become "religious," creating substitutionary deities to take the true God's place.

This is the explanation of the universality of religion on this planet. The fact that people are religious does not prove that we are all seeking God. It proves the contrary. It proves that we are all running away from God. Although we are unwilling to know God and do not want him, we are nevertheless unable to do without him and try to fill the void with our substitute gods.

R. C. Sproul has dealt with this very well in the book I referred to earlier: *If There Is a God, Why Are There Atheists?* He puts it like this:

In the case of God's revelation, man encounters something ominously threatening which is traumatic. The memory of conscious knowledge of the trauma is not maintained in its lucid threatening state but is repressed. It is "put down" or "held in captivity" in the unconsciousness.

That which is repressed is not destroyed. The memory remains though it may be buried in the subconscious realm. Knowledge of God is unacceptable to man and as a result man does his best to blot it out or at least camouflage it in such a way that its threatening character can be concealed or dulled. That the human psyche is capable of such repression has been thoroughly demonstrated in a multitude of ways. The critical factor, however,... is that the knowledge is not obliterated or destroyed. It remains intact though deeply submerged in the unconscious.

In the substitution-exchange process, the repressed knowledge manifests itself outwardly in a disguised or veiled form. The original knowledge is threatening; its disguised form is much less threatening.... In theological terms, what results from the repression is the profession of atheism either in militant terms, or its less militant form of agnosticism, or a kind of religion that makes God less of a threat than he really is. Either option, atheism or religion, manifests an exchange of the truth for a lie.

From Darkness to Light

There is one more word that we need to look at before bringing this chapter to a close, and that is the word *darkness.* It occurs in verse 21: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." Darkness is an image, of course. It is the equivalent of Paul's saying that "their thinking became futile" or "they became fools" or "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

When men and women turn away from God, they do not admit this, of course. Instead, they speak of "bright new ideas," "enlightenment" or "seeing the light." One whole movement in philosophy in Europe a century or so ago was called the Enlightenment. But, since God is the sole source of light, any ideas of enlightenment apart from him that we may think we have are an illusion. And what we need is the revelation

and power of God to bring us back from selfinflicted darkness into God's light.

That is what has happened to Christians. We do not have any ability to rediscover the light of God by ourselves. Before God worked in us we were as much in the dark as anybody. Paul writes in Ephesians of what we were like in our unsaved state, much as he writes of the heathen in Romans: "They [the unsaved] are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Eph. 4:18). However, as the result of God's illuminating work, "... you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8). To return to our illustration from psychiatry, in the case of Christians God has uncovered for us the cause of our great spiritual trauma. He has dealt with our rejection of his revelation (as well as with all our other sins) in Christ, making that known to us. Then he has brought us back into harmony with himself so that we no longer need fear him or run away from him but rather bask in his light.

We are also to live by his light. For in the passage from Ephesians cited above, Paul goes on to say, "Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph. 5:8-10). If we are of the light, we must live by the light. If we know God, we must show it by being like him.

Chapter 20.
God Gave Them Up

Romans 1:24-28

I do not know whether Oscar Wilde was reflecting more on the divine nature or human nature in saying, "When the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers." But, according to the Book of Romans, he may well have been doing both, and have been correct in both instances.

Thus far in our study of Romans we have been concentrating on human rebellion against God, and we have seen—indeed, Paul has explicitly told us—that the wrath of God "is being revealed from heaven" against men and women because of this rebellion. In what way is God showing wrath? It is clear what *we* have done. We have (1) suppressed the truth about God; (2) refused to glorify, or worship, God as God; and (3) declined to be thankful. As a result human beings have become "darkened" in their thinking. We have become fools. Nevertheless, up to this point we have not been told specifically of anything that God has actually done to unleash his wrath upon humanity. Now this changes. For the first time in the letter we are told—three times in succession—that God has abandoned men and women to perversion. The sentence says, "God gave them over." It is found in verses 24, 26, and 28.

But here is the irony. And here is why I quoted Oscar Wilde. Man's punishment is to be abandoned by God. But, of course, this is precisely what man has been fighting for ever since Adam's first rebellion in the Garden of Eden. Man has wanted to get rid of God, to push him out of his life. In contemporary terms he is saying, "God, I just want you to leave me alone. Take a seat on that chair over there. Shut up, and let me get on with my life as I want to live it." And so God does!

Like the father of the Prodigal Son, he releases the rebellious child, permitting him to depart with all his many possessions and goods for the far country.

Adrift in God's Universe

Well! Isn't that what we want? Yes, it is what we think we want. But the problem is that it doesn't turn out as we anticipate. In fact, it turns out exactly the reverse. We think of God as a miser of happiness, keeping back from us all that would make us happy. We think that by running away from him we will be happy, wild, and free. But it doesn't work that way. Instead of happiness we find misery. Instead of freedom we find the debilitating bondage of sin.

Many who have studied the Bible for a long time know the phrase I have quoted in the King James wording, but this is a case in which the modern translations do better in capturing the meaning for our day. The King James Version of the Bible used the words "God gave them up" at this point. The King James translators knew what they meant, of course. They meant a judicial abandonment of the human race to the consequences of its rebellion. But, unfortunately, for most of us today those words sound like a simple hands-off policy in which men and women really are freed up to pursue and practice whatever they think will please them. That is not quite the idea. "God gave them up" sounds as if God simply let people drift off to nowhere, like releasing a porcelain pitcher in space. The actual idea is seen much better in the New International Version. For it is not that God gives the human race up to nothing, but rather that he gives it over to the consequences of the rebellious, sinful directions it has taken.

It is like releasing the porcelain pitcher on earth rather than in space. When you let go of the pitcher it does not drift off into nowhere. You release it from your hand to the law of gravity, and when you do that it falls downward and breaks—if the fall is far enough and the ground hard.

The reason for this is in the very nature of things, and in the fact that what they are can never be otherwise. We need to see this. If you or I were God, then we could get away with the kind of rebellion or sin without consequences that we seem to want. We could make the universe run the way we want it. But we cannot do that. The universe with all its laws, physical and moral, is a given—because God is a given. Since God can never be other than he is, the universe will always be as it is. And this means that when you and I rebel against God, we must by the very nature of the case do it on God's terms and according to God's laws rather than our own. When we run away from God we think our way will be uphill, because we want it to be so. But the way is actually downhill. We are pulled down by the law of moral gravity—when God lets go. **The Downhill Slope**

What happens is illustrated in the case of Jonah, the prophet who tried to run away from God. He rejected God's call for him to go and preach to Nineveh and instead set off for Tarshish at the far end of the Mediterranean. But he didn't get where he was going, and his path was constantly downhill until God turned him around and got him going to Nineveh. In the King James Bible, which makes this point a bit neater than the New International Version, we are told four times over that the prophet's path was downhill. We read that he went "*down* to Joppa" and that when he found a ship bound for Tarshish he went "*down* into it" (Jonah 1:3). Then we are told that he had gone "*down* into the sides of the ship" (v. 5). Still later, after he had been cast overboard, he recounted the experience, saying, "I went *down* to the bottoms of the mountains" (Jonah 2:6).

(The italics are mine.)

Down! Down! Down! Down! It is a sad life history, but it is the experience of all who run from God, and Paul says all men and women do run from God, trying to rearrange the universe to fit their own desires.

In Romans, Paul marks this downward lemming-like rush of the human race in three stages.

1. *"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another"* (v. 24). I do not know why, when he set out to trace this downward moral path of human beings, the apostle Paul concentrated on sexual sins, since he could clearly have chosen other sins as well. Perhaps it is because sexual sins are so visible (sins of the spirit are harder to detect) or because the damage in this area is so evident or because this was the obvious, stinking cesspool of corruption in his day and, therefore, something those to whom he was writing would clearly understand. Whatever the reason—and there may be even more reasons than these—it is an excellent example.

Sex is a wonderful gift, a gift imparted to the human race by God. It is a gift to be enjoyed. *But* it is be enjoyed within the bonds of marriage, not

outside of marriage and, above all, not in casual entanglements. If it is, the result is always what Paul declares it will be, namely, "impurity" and the "degrading" of one's body.

It is evident that hardly anything in Romans 1 is more contemporary so far as our own culture is concerned. Today we are witnessing a frantic pursuit of pleasure that has been called rightly, even by the secular media, "the new hedonism." That is, ours is seemingly a culture in which casual sex and every other kind of casual pleasure is an ideal. And it is an ideal that has been actualized by many! With what results? At the start of this path the Prodigal Son would no doubt extol it for its freedoms. He would speak of being free to think new thoughts, have new experiences, and shake off all that old inhibiting sense of guilt that bound him previously. But, given time, the feeling changes, and the one who is running away comes inevitably to feel used, taken advantage of, dirty, and betrayed.

Not long ago CBS television ran an hour-long special on the freewheeling lifestyle in California, interviewing particularly many women who had been caught up in it. Interestingly, their nearly universal opinion was that they had been betrayed by the sexual revolution. As one woman said, "All men want from us is our bodies; we have had enough of that to last a lifetime."

Isn't it the case that these women were expressing precisely what Paul says in verse 25, when he observes that those who act this way "have exchanged the truth of God for a lie"? Let's say it clearly, as the world is beginning to recognize: The "new hedonism" and the "sexual revolution" are a deception!

But there is more. There is a second downhill step on this path....

2. *"Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion"* (vv. 26-27).

I wrote a moment ago that there is nothing more contemporary in terms of today's culture than Paul's description of a declining society in this great first chapter of Romans. This has been clear already in terms of today's forms of hedonism and the sexual revolution. Unfortunately, the decline becomes even more apparent as Paul, with almost shocking candor, begins to talk about sexual perversions, namely, lesbianism and male homosexuality. For centuries these matters were hardly spoken of in western society. Although some were no doubt practicing these acts, they were considered so reprehensible that a moral person not only was not to speak about them, but he or she was not even to know what such vices involved. But today? Today they are written about with explicit detail in virtually every newspaper and magazine in our land. Grade-school children discuss them. Not only are we not shocked—but we have become complacent, as if this were a natural expression of an upright spirit.

"Natural" is the important word here—Paul uses it in verse 27, and the opposite term,
"unnatural," in verse 26—because it explains why this stage is a *further* step along the downward moral path.

Let me elaborate on that statement. Fornication and adultery (which are in view in verse 24) are not "unnatural" sins, for they are not against nature. Of course, they are true sins, for they break the moral law of God. They result in "impurity" and in the "degrading" of our bodies, as Paul says. But they are not unnatural. On the contrary, they are in one sense quite natural. They are accomplished by using one's body in a natural way. Not so with homosexuality! Homosexuality is "unnatural," and it is accomplished by using one's body in an unnatural way, that is, against nature. In the first case, we may well need the Bible to tell us that fornication is wrong. The popular song asks, "How can it be wrong when it seems so right?" But in the case of homosexuality we do not even need this special revelation. A look at one's sexual apparatus should convince anyone that practices of this kind are not normal. They were not meant to be.

Perhaps this is why at this point, and at no other point in his discussion of the results of our rebellion, Paul speaks of a specific judgment of God upon the sin itself: "Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (v. 27). Up to this point Paul has not been saying that God punishes these or other particular sins with particular penalties, but rather that the abandonment of human beings to the committing of the sin is itself the punishment. That is, God punishes you by letting you do what you want. But not here, at least not *only* that. Here Paul speaks of a particular penalty "received in themselves" by those who sin in this way.

Is Paul speaking of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome)? No! He had never heard of AIDS, though he was probably thinking at least in part of other sexual diseases. But the point is irrelevant. What Paul is saying is that sin does and will have consequences, and "unnatural" sins will have particularly "unnatural" consequences.

Indeed, it is not only Paul who would say this. Not long ago *Time* magazine ran a cover story on AIDS, called "The Big Chill: Fear of AIDS," in which even this obviously secular magazine spoke religiously. It spoke of AIDS as "a vague sort of retribution, an Old

Testament-style revenge." It quoted novelist Erica Jong, author of *Fear of Flying and* a former high priestess of sexual abandon, as saying, "It's hard enough to find attractive single men without having to quiz them on their history of bisexuality and drug use, demand blood test results and thrust condoms into their hands. Wouldn't it be easier to give up sex altogether and join some religious order?" *Time* also quoted a Los Angeles entertainment writer: "AIDS pushes monogamy right back up there on the priority list."

Why is this? Why are even secular magazines and newspapers beginning to sound like prophets? It is because of the given, because of the unchangeable physical and moral character of the universe in which we live. We may not like it; most of us don't. We would change it if we could. But we cannot. It is God's universe. It does not change. Therefore, the only wise thing is to come to terms with it, repent of sin, and come back to God in the way he has provided: through faith in the sacrifice of himself for us by Jesus Christ.

Yet there is something more...

3. *"Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done"* (v. 28). The first time I began to think about this threefold repetition of the sentence "God gave them over" in this section of Romans, it seemed to me that at this point something was apparently wrong with the order. Paul is tracing a downward declining path, resulting from humanity's rebellion against God, yet here the order doesn't seem to be downward. We can understand that when men and women abandoned God, God abandoned them: first, to sexual impurity and, second, to sexual perversions. That is surely downhill. But now we find that God abandons them "to a depraved mind." Isn't that something that should have come first? Doesn't sin originate in the mind? Shouldn't the third of these consequences have been listed first, *before* the other two consequences?

I was puzzled by this sequence until I realized that the "depraved mind" about which Paul is writing is not just any sinful mind—he has earlier

talked about the generally foolish minds and generally darkened hearts of human beings—but about the specifically "depraved mind" created by continuing down this awful path for a lifetime. At the end is a mind not merely foolish or in error, but totally depraved. It is a mind so depraved that it begins to think that what is bad is actually good and that what is good is actually bad. May I say it? It is the mind of the devil, which is what Adam chose to pursue when he followed the dangling carrot: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Adam did not become "like God," knowing good and evil; he became "like Satan." And, being like Satan, in time he came to call the good bad and the bad good. How else can one explain man's continual flight from him from whom alone all good gifts come (cf. James 1:17)?

The evidence of this bottom stage of depravity is disclosed in verse 32, the end of Romans 1: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." The new word here is "approve." It is not only that people do what is sinful. A person might do that, be ashamed of his or her action, and then repent of it. But here, at the very end of this awful downhill path of judicial abandonment described in this chapter of Romans, the individuals involved actually come to *approve* of what is evil.

How do you appeal for good to a person who has become like that? Every argument you could possibly use would be reversed. The case is hopeless.

"How Can I Give You Up?"

Hopeless? Yes, but not for God. For if it were, why would Paul even be writing this letter? As a matter of fact, if it were hopeless, *he* would not be writing it, for he was one of the most hopeless cases of all, as he reminds us several times in his epistles.

We are focusing here on the idea that "God gave them up." The way I want to state this is to say that although in a sense God has certainly given the race *over* to the natural outworkings of its rebellious ways—a

judgment we see about us on all hands—in another sense God has not "given up" at all. At least he has not given up on those on whom he has set his affection. I think of the way in which he speaks through Hosea to the sinful nation of Israel:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?
How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again."

Hosea 11:8-9

If God actually did give up on humanity forever, all would be hopeless. The Lord Jesus Christ would not have come. He would not have died for our sin. There would be no gospel. But that is not the case. Jesus did come. There is a gospel. The way back to the eternal, sovereign, holy God is open. This is the Good News. Hallelujah!

And need I say more? If there is the gospel, if this is still the age of God's grace, if God has not given up on us ultimately and forever—though he will eventually do that for some one day— then we are not to give up on other people either. How can we, if we have tasted the elixir of grace ourselves?

We tend to give up, at least if the sin of the one we are abandoning is different from our own. We think of others as too far gone, or as having sinned beyond the point of a genuine repentance. Or, terrible as it is, we think of their sin as proof, evidence, that God has abandoned them forever. Many have done that with homosexuals. They regard AIDS as the kind of divine judgment on this sin that precludes our having any pity on the victims or working to bring them the only salvation they can know. Is AIDS a judgment? I believe it is, just like many other consequences of sin. But it is not the final judgment. And until that final judgment breaks forth on our race, it is still the day of grace in which all

who know the Good News and are obeying the voice of Christ in taking it to the lost can be hopeful.

Someone once spoke to John Newton, the man who had been a slave trader and a "slave to slaves" earlier in his life, about a person he regarded as a hopeless case. He despaired of him. Newton replied, "I have never despaired for any man since God saved me." We should not despair either. The consequences of sin are dreadful. But they alone, if nothing else, should compel us forward as agents of God's great grace and reconciliation.

Chapter 21.
Lifting the Lid on Hell

Romans 1:29-31

For several chapters we have been studying the most dreadful description of the sinful human race in all literature, the description provided by the apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-32. It began with the rejection of God by all people and has proceeded to God's abandonment of us, as a result of which human beings rapidly fall into a horrible pit of depravity, to their own hurt and the hurt of others.

In the last verses of Romans 1, to which we come now, Paul rounds out his description by a catalogue of vices. It is a long list, containing twenty-one items. But how are we to handle this? How can we face such a devastating unmasking of ourselves? Some will not face it at all, of course. Indeed, even many preachers will not. These verses detail what theologians call "total depravity," and people do not want to hear about that. So many preachers change their message to fit today's cultural expectations. They speak of our goodness, the potential for human betterment, the comfort of the gospel—without speaking of that for which the gospel is the cure.

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "your neighbor as yourself (Matt.

22:37, 39). But, as one writer says, "Man as sinner hates God, hates man, and hates himself. He would kill God if he could. He does kill his fellow man when he can. [And] he commits spiritual suicide every day of his life."

The interesting thing about this, however, is that although the pulpit has been muted in its proclamation of the truth of man's depravity, the secular writers have not. They write as if they have never met a good man or a virtuous woman. Psychiatrists say that if you scratch the surface and thus penetrate beneath the thin veneer of human culture and respectability, you "lift the lid of hell."

All Kinds of Wickedness

At the beginning of this section Paul wrote that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). In that verse the second use of "wickedness" refers to man's suppression of the truth about God. But at the beginning of the verse, where the term is used for the first time,
"wickedness" is distinguished from "godlessness"; godlessness and wickedness are employed to designate two great categories of human evil. The first embraces all sins against God, that is, sins of the first table of the law. The second embraces the sins of man against man, those of the second table of the law. Generally speaking, it is the sins of "godlessness" that we have been looking at to this point; they are fundamental. However, in these last verses Paul lists examples of man's "wickedness."

1. *Wickedness.* It is probably to indicate that he is now moving to this second category of sins that Paul begins his catalogue of vices with this term. For "wickedness" in verse 29 is the same word that is used in verse 18. In Greek it is a composite negative term, made up of the positive word for "righteousness" (*dikaios*), preceded by the negative particle *a*, meaning "not." Literally it means "not righteous," or "unjust." Since what is "right" is determined by the

character or law of God, this term denotes everything that is opposed to that divine law or character. It embraces what follows.

2. *Evil.* The Greek word is *ponēria*, which is a general term for badness. One commentator says, "This refers to the general inclination to evil that reigned among the heathen and made them practice and take pleasure in vicious and unprofitable actions." But, of course, it is not just the heathen who are evil, unless we rightly call everyone by that name. We, too, are evil.

3. *Greed.* In other places, this word (*pleonexia*) is translated "covetousness." It is what God prohibits in the tenth of the Ten Commandments and what is nevertheless the apparent basis of our western economies. It is the desire always to want a little more. There is a proper kind of ambition, of course. There is a proper desire to improve oneself, particularly for the benefit of others. But that is not what is referred to by this term. It is "the passion for more," the lust to advance oneself even at the expense of others.

4. *Depravity.* This word denotes that deliberate wickedness that delights in doing other people harm. It could be translated "maliciousness."

As I have mentioned, there are twenty-one terms for evil in these verses, and these are just the first four. But these four belong together in Paul's listing, since they are vices with which Paul says the human race is "filled." What holds them together? They seem primarily to describe injustices that humans commit against the property of other people, and thus also against their well-being.

Hatred of One's Fellowman

Having shown in the earlier part of this chapter of Romans that human beings hate God and would kill him if they could, Paul now shows how they also hate and attempt to destroy their fellows. In other words, the first four terms describe sins against the property and well-being of others. In the next five terms Paul details sins against the very persons

of other human beings. The sins are: envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice.

5. *Envy.* Earlier Paul has spoken of "greed," indicating that people never seem to be satisfied with what they have but instead clamor for more, often at the cost of others. Here he goes further. Envy is related to greed, but it goes beyond it, because it shows that the chief factor in our greed is jealousy over the fact that other people have more. Or worse! It is possible that they have less and that we are still greedy for what they have, simply because we envy them. In ancient Greece there was a man whose name was Aristides. He was a great man and was called "Aristides the Just." But he was put on trial for something, as many just men were, and a citizen of Athens came to him not knowing who he was and asked him to vote for his own banishment. Aristides asked, "But what harm has Aristides done you?"

The man said, "None. I am just tired of hearing him called 'Aristides the Just.'" That is envy in its most destructive form.

6. *Murder.* The Greek word for "murder" (*phonou*) sounds like the word for "envy" (*phthonou*), which is why they probably appear together so often in ancient texts. But they belong together naturally, too, since murder often flows from envy. Cain's murder of his brother Abel, the first murder in history, is an example. "And why did he murder him?" John asks. "Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Another early example is Lamech, who killed a young man who had injured him (perhaps only verbally) and then boasted about the deed (Gen. 4:23). We must remember here also that, according to Jesus, murder is not only the outward act of taking a life. It is also the hatred in the heart that leads to it (cf. Matt. 5:21-22).

7. *Strife.* The root meaning of this word is "debate." But it came to mean the bad side of debate, which is contention, quarreling, or wrangling.

8. *Deceit.* Paul is going to return to this word in his summation of human depravity in chapter 3, saying in verse 13 that the "tongues" of the wicked practice this vice. It denotes outright treachery by which words are used to ensnare the unwary for the deceiver's personal gain. Much of the business of the western world is carried on by this means.

9. *Malice.* This word is derived from two Greek words: *kakos,* which means "bad," "evil," "worthless," or "pernicious" (we have it in our word *cacophony,* which is a bad or discordant sound) and *ethos,* which means "habit," "custom" or "usage." So the word has the idea of customary or habitual evil. The malicious person is one who is normally set against other people and is out to harm them.

The Central Sins

It is hard to group these vices to give logic to Paul's treatment, and it may even be wrong to try to see meaningful groupings in his arrangement. Nevertheless, if the first four terms catalogue sins against the property or well-being of others, and the next five list sins against other persons, it may be that the next six terms are, as one commentator suggests, "those of which pride is the center." They are certainly among the most harmful of these vices.

10. *Gossips.* Some words in every language sound like what they describe, and this is the case here. We have words like hiss, buzz, thump, and bang, for example. This Greek word is *psithuristas,* which sounds like a whisper and is, in fact, sometimes translated "whisperings." It refers to the slanderous gossip that is often spread in secret and that is so harmful to another's reputation. It is a deadly vice. It is interesting that the Hebrew word that denotes the murmuring of a snake charmer is translated in the Septuagint by the verb form of this very word: to whisper.

11. *Slanderers.* Slander carries gossip one step further, since gossip is unleashed in secret but slander is done openly. The Greek word literally means "to speak against" someone, or "defame" him.

12. *God-haters.* At first glance, this word seems to be out of place in this listing, because here we are dealing with man's sins against man and "God-hater" seems more properly to belong in the earlier verses, in which man's opposition to God was examined. For this reason some have taken the word in a passive sense, meaning "hated by God," that is, as a term for hardened sinners. But surely it cannot mean that in a list of human vices. Actually, it does belong here, since it comes between the sin of slander and the sin of pride. It is as if Paul notes that in his "slander" man does not merely slander other human beings but is slandering God, too, not failing to speak even against the Almighty. That is the essence of insolence and arrogance, the next items the apostle mentions.

Not many people would admit that they hate God, choosing rather to think of themselves as rather tolerant of him. But nowhere do they show their hatred more than in their condescending attitudes. Scratch beneath the surface, allow something to come into their lives that they consider unwarranted or unfair, and their hatred of God immediately boils over. "How could God let this happen to me?" they demand. If they could, they would strangle him!

13. *Insolent.* This is the great Greek word *hubris*, which means "pride." But it is a special kind of pride. It is pride that sets a human being up against God. The Greeks regarded this as the greatest of flaws, one the gods would not tolerate. No translation can convey all this in one English word, but the New International Version does a fair job when it renders it "insolent."

14. *Arrogant.* Today people almost think of arrogance as a virtue, considering it a properly belligerent attitude toward hostile society. But it is rightly included in this list of vices. Arrogance rises from a feeling of personal superiority that regards others with haughtiness. Robert Haldane characterizes the word as describing those who are "puffed up with a high opinion of themselves" and who regard others "with contempt, as if they were unworthy of any intercourse with them."

15. *Boastful.* Boasting is based on pride. It is to seek admiration by claiming to be or have what one actually is not or does not possess.

Creators of Evil

Up to this point all the vices mentioned are but one word in Greek. But now Paul seems to need two words each to describe the next evils: "inventors of evil things" (*epheupetas kakōn*) and "disobedient to parents" (*goneusin apeitheis*).

16. *They invent ways of doing evil.* Real creativity belongs to God alone, since at best we can only think his thoughts after him. But here, in an ironical way, Paul suggests that the one area in which our creativity excels is inventing new ways to do evil. The old ways are not enough for us. They are too slow, too ineffective, too unproductive, too dull. So we expend our efforts to make more. This was a term used by the author of 2 Maccabees to describe Antiochus Epiphanes and by Tacitus to describe Sejanus. It is this kind of invention that the psalm is speaking of when it says that people "provoked him [God] to anger with their inventions" (Ps. 106:29 KJV).

17. *They disobey their parents.* Few things more characterize our day than children's utter disregard of their parents' wishes. But this must have been common enough in antiquity, too, since so much is said against it in the Bible. The fifth of the Ten Commandments, the first of the second table, says: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12a). Paul refers to it in Ephesians, noting that it is the first commandment with a promise attached: "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Eph. 6:2).

Senseless, Faithless, Heartless, Ruthless

The Greek word for disobedience (the seventeenth vice listed) is a compound word beginning with the prefix *a,* meaning "not," just like the term "not righteous" was used for "wickedness" in verse 29. That

sound apparently stuck in Paul's mind and led to a series of four similar terms, which conclude this devastating catalogue: *asynetous, asynthetous, astorgous,* and *aneleēmonas*. The New International Version captures a bit of this flavor by rendering the four terms as:

senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

18. *Senseless.* To most of us "senseless" probably means unconscious, but that is not the thought here. "Without understanding" is a fuller translation, but even so we need to make clear the kind of lack of understanding we mean. Haldane has it right in saying that "the persons so described were not destitute of understanding as to the things of this world." As to these they might be "most intelligent and enlightened." Rather it was "in a moral sense, or as respects the things of God, [that] they were unintelligent and stupid.... All men are by nature undiscerning as to the things of God, and to this there never was an exception."

19. *Faithless.* This word is not built on the Greek word for faith (*pistis*), which has to do with belief or trust in God. Rather, the root is *tithēmi* ("put" or "place"), and the term Paul uses actually has to do with breaking an appointment or covenant. "Breaking faith" is the idea. It means that what people solemnly commit themselves to cannot be trusted.

20. *Heartless.* This word literally means "without natural affection." It can be seen in the mother who intentionally aborts or abandons her child or the father who abandons his family.

21. *Ruthless.* The Greek word means "without mercy." Godet writes, "It calls up before the mind the entire population of the great cities flocking to the circus to behold the fights of gladiators, frantically applauding the effusion of human blood, and gloating over the dying agonies of the vanquished combatant. Such is an example of the unspeakable hardness of heart to which the whole society of the Gentile world descended." Ah, but it was not only in the ancient world that people lacked mercy. Ours is a particularly ruthless age. We tend to think that others are unmerciful,

particularly when they deal harshly with us. But the truth is that cruelty is at the heart of even the most gentle human being.

One commentator observes that as we scan these lists, "we cannot but be impressed with the apostle's insight into the depravity of human nature as apostatized from God, the severity of his assessment of these moral conditions, and the breadth of his knowledge respecting the concrete ways in which human depravity came to expression."

The Road to Hell

I began this section by saying that it is hard to imagine anything more horrible than this great catalogue of human vices, not merely because they are horrible in themselves, but also because they are with us everywhere. To study a list like this does not mean that every individual is equally guilty of each vice or that there have not been periods of history when they have been either more or less prominent. But, at best, these are all just below the surface of our respectability, and they quickly become apparent whenever you cross our sinful human nature or scratch this surface.

Yet, horrible as this is, it is only a foretaste of what hell itself will be like. For hell is only what is described in these verses, going on and on for eternity. Lloyd-Jones writes, "Hell is a condition in which life is lived away from God and all the restraints of God's holiness." That is precisely what is described in this passage. The basic point is that the human race has chosen to go its way without God and that as a result of this choice God has abandoned the race to the result of its own sinful choices. We have made earth a hell! And we will carry that hell with us into hell, making hell even more hellish than it is already! We and hell itself will go on becoming more and more hell-like for eternity.

Oh, the horror of our choice!

Oh, the glory of the gospel!

A few weeks before I preached this study, after my earlier sermon on "The Psychology of Atheism," I was roundly chastised in a local paper

for preaching such a harsh message, as if I had no word of love in my teaching. It may have been that the love of God was not as apparent in that message as it might have been, and if so, I need to correct that fault. But I do know that it is only an awareness of the horror of our sin that ever leads us to appreciate the gospel when we hear it. What if we think we are basically all right before God? What if we think ourselves good? Then we think we do not need the gospel. We think we can do without God, which is exactly what these verses are describing.

When our blinders are stripped off and the depravity of the race—to which we contribute—is unfolded before us, the glory of the gospel bursts forth, and Romans 1:16 and 17 becomes for us what Martin Luther found it to be for him, namely, "the door to Paradise." The gospel is then seen to be "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes"—no matter how sinful, no matter how corrupt.

We do not deserve this gospel. How could we? We could not even invent it. But because God is not like us—because he is not "wicked," "evil," "greedy," "depraved," "envious," "senseless," "faithless," "heartless," "ruthless," or anything else that is bad—he not only could invent it, he did!

Chapter 22.
How Low Can You Go?

Romans 1:32

Over the years I have collected questions about the Christian life that I wish someone had answered for me when I was much younger. One is "Why can't a person sin just a little bit?" I think this is an important question, because it is where most of us find ourselves much of the time. Most of us would not admit to wanting to sin in big ways, and we probably don't. We know that sin is destructive. We do not want to make an utter shipwreck of our lives. But we wonder from time to time why we can't sin "just a little bit." God forbids all sin, of course. But surely all sins are not equally terrible. What would be so bad about our

just dipping into sin now and then—to sort of satisfy our appetite for it, have our fling, and then get back out and go on with our "upright" Christian lives?

Having studied most of the first chapter of Romans carefully, we should know the answer to that question. The problem with just dipping into sin is that sin never stops at that point. The problem with sinning "just a little bit" is that each bit is followed by just a little bit more, until God has been banished from life's horizons entirely and we have ruined everything.

The Downhill Path

The way this happens is spelled out in the second half of Romans 1 by a threefold repetition of the phrase "God gave them over," which we have already studied. (It occurs in verses 24, 26, and 28.) Just before this, Paul has shown how we reject God. We reject God by suppressing the knowledge about him that we have received from nature and by allowing the God-like vacuum in our lives to be filled with substitutes. We do it by saying, in effect (though we often do not admit it even to ourselves), "God, we do not want you. We want you to get out of our lives and leave us alone. We want to do our own thing without your interference."

So that is just what God does! God does not abandon us in the absolute sense, since this is still God's world and we still have to live in it and conform to the laws of this world, whether we want to or not. But God does abandon us to our own devices in the sense that he withdraws his restraints. He allows us to go our own way, abandoning us judicially to sin's consequences.

That path is definitely downhill!

It cannot be any other way, of course. If God is the source of all good, as the Bible declares him to be, then to abandon God is to abandon the good and to launch oneself on a path leading in progressive measure to all that is evil. If we will not have God, who is truth, we will find falsehood. If we will not seek God, who is holy, we will pursue

perversions. If we will not have God, who is the source of all reality, we will have unreality. We will pursue fantasies and dreams and be disillusioned.

A review seems appropriate at this point. In declaring that God gives us over to our own devices, Paul describes a downhill slide that looks like this:

1. *God gave them over to sexual impurity* (v. 24). The reference is to fornication and adultery, which, Paul says, have two outcomes. First, they result in the degrading of our bodies. People who have had a variety of sexual partners often testify to this. Second, they result in exchanging what is good and true for what is bad and a deception. Paul calls it "a lie." Again, many who have sought personal fulfillment through sexual experimentation testify that promises of the "liberated" life were deceptions. The promised satisfaction and fulfillment did not materialize.

2. *God gave them over to shameful lusts* (v. 26). This refers to perversions, chiefly male homosexuality and lesbianism, and it is a step downward from mere sexual experimentation. This is because, in addition to being merely sinful, these perversions are "unnatural." That is, they are against nature. Bodies were not meant to function in these ways. Those who sin in these ways do so, therefore, not only against God's revelation in the Old and New Testaments, but also against the very order of creation.

3. *God gave them over to a depraved mind* (v. 28). When we looked at this verse before, I asked why this is a step further down the ladder of abandonment by God than items one and two. After all, sins of the mind precede sins of the flesh; a person has to think sin before practicing it. So why should this be the third item, rather than the first?

The answer, as we saw earlier, is that this is not the kind of mental depravity Paul is thinking of. It is true that thoughts about evil generally precede evil actions. But here Paul is speaking about the kind of

thought perversion that results in the person involved regarding what is good as what (to him or her) appears evil, and what is evil as what (to him or her) appears good. This brings us to the verse with which this great chapter of Romans ends, our text for this study. Verse 32 says of those who have sunk to this point, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." The key word here is "approve." It means that these people sanction both the evil and the evildoers.

Moral Insanity

This is insanity, of course—moral insanity. But it is important to see that this is exactly the point to which rejection of God and suppression of the truth about God lead us.

It is helpful at this point to think of the story of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, as told in the early chapters of Daniel. The theme of Daniel is the identity of the Most High God, and it is established early in the book when we are told that after Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem, he carried articles from the temple of God in Jerusalem "to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put [them] in the treasure house of his god" (Dan. 1:2). This was a way of saying that, in Nebuchadnezzar's opinion, his god was stronger than the Jewish God. And so it seemed! Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem. He did not understand that God had used him merely as an instrument of judgment upon his disobedient people, as he had repeatedly said he would do.

But Nebuchadnezzar was not really interested in proving that his *god* was stronger than the Jews' God; he was not all that religious. Nebuchadnezzar's god was only a projection of himself, an *alter ego,* and the real struggle of the book is therefore actually between Nebuchadnezzar himself and Jehovah. In other words, it is exactly the struggle that Paul depicts in Romans as being between sinful humanity and God. Nebuchadnezzar did not want to acknowledge God, precisely what Paul says *we* do not want to do. He wanted to run his own life,

achieve what he wanted to achieve and then claim the glory for himself for those achievements.

The climax of his rebellion, recorded in Daniel 4, came when Nebuchadnezzar looked over Babylon from the roof of his palace and claimed the glory of God for himself, saying, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30). This is the cry of the secular humanist. It describes life as of man, by man, and for man's glory.

The point for which I introduce this illustration comes now, in the nature of the judgment pronounced upon this powerful but arrogant emperor. Sometimes, when we think of God's dispensing of judgments, we think of him as acting somewhat arbitrarily, as if he were merely going down a list of punishments to see what punishment he has left for some special sinner. "Let's see now," he might muse. "Nebuchadnezzar? What will it be? Not leprosy, not kidney stones, not paralysis, not goiter. Ah, here it is: *insanity.* That's what I'll use with Nebuchadnezzar." We may think that is what happened, when we read about the voice "from heaven" that declared: "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (Dan. 4:31-32).

But this is not the way it happened. God is not arbitrary. He does not operate by sorting through a list of options. Everything God does is significant. So when God caused Nebuchadnezzar to be lowered from the pinnacle of human pride and glory to the baseness of insanity, it was God's way of saying that this is what happens to all who suppress the truth about God and take the glory of God for themselves. The path is not uphill. It is downhill, and it ends in that moral insanity by which we declare what is good to be evil, and what is evil to be good.

Bestial Behavior

But it is not only insanity that we see in the case of Nebuchadnezzar. We see a dramatization of bestial behavior, too, in the words decreeing that Nebuchadnezzar would "live with the wild animals [and] eat grass like cattle." Indeed, what came to pass was even worse. We are told that "he was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird" (Dan. 4:33). It is a horrible picture. But it is merely a dramatic Old Testament way of describing what Paul is saying in Romans: If we will not have God, we will not become like God ("like God, knowing good and evil," Gen. 3:5); on the contrary, we will become like and live like animals.

At this point I always think of Psalm 8, verses 4 through 7, which say:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars. which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.
You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field.

These verses fix man at a very interesting place in the created order: lower than the angels, or heavenly beings, but higher than the animals —somewhere between. This is what Thomas Aquinas saw when he described man as a mediating being. He is like the angels in that he has a soul. But he is like the beasts in that he has a body. The angels have souls but not bodies, while the animals have bodies but not souls.

But here is the point. Although man is a mediating being, created to be somewhere between the angels and the animals, in Psalm 8 he is nevertheless described as being somewhat lower than the angels rather than as being somewhat higher than the beasts. In other words, although between the angels and the beasts, man is nevertheless destined to look, not downward to the beasts, but upward to the angels and beyond the heavenly beings to God, becoming increasingly like him. If he will not look up and thus become increasingly like God, he will inevitably look

down and become like the animals. Like Nebuchadnezzar, he will become beastlike.

Over the last ten or so years I have noticed something very interesting about our culture. I have noticed a number of articles (and sometimes books) that have tended to justify or at least explain bestial human behavior on the ground that we are, after all, "just animals." We have perversions, but—well, the animals have perversions, too.

Some time ago an article appeared in a scientific journal about a certain kind of duck. Two scientists had been observing a family of these ducks, and they reported something that they called "gang rape" in this duck family. I am sure they did not want to excuse this crime among humans by the inevitable comparison they were making. But I think their point was that gang rape among humans is at least understandable, given our animal ancestry. These scientists had an evolutionary, naturalistic background, and I think they were saying, "After all, gang rape is not that surprising when you consider that even the ducks do it."

A story of a similar nature appeared in the September 6, 1982, issue of *Newsweek* magazine. It was accompanied by a picture of a baboon presumably killing an infant baboon, and over this there was a headline which read: "Biologists Say Infanticide Is as Normal as the Sex Drive—And That Most Animals, Including Man, Practice It." The title says everything. It identifies man as an animal, and it justifies his behavior on the basis of this identification. The logic goes like this: (1) man is an animal; (2) animals kill their offspring; (3) therefore, it is all right (or at least understandable) that human beings kill their offspring. But, of course, the argument is fallacious. Most animals do not kill their offspring. They protect their young and care for them. And even if, in a few rare instances, some animals do kill their young, this is still nothing to compare to the crimes regarding the young of which human beings are capable. In this country alone, for example, we kill over one and a half million babies each year by abortion—in most instances, simply for the convenience of the mother.

Worse Than the Animals

I want to take this a step further, however, and to do that I share the following story. Dr. John Gerstner, Professor Emeritus of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was teaching about the depravity of man, and to make his point he compared men and women to rats. After he had finished his address there was a question-and-answer period, and someone who had been offended by the comparison asked Gerstner to apologize. Gerstner did. "I do apologize," he said. "I apologize profusely. The comparison was terribly unfair... to the rats." He then went on to show that what a rat does, it does by the gifts of God that make it ratlike. It does not sin. But we, when we behave like rats, behave worse than we should and even worse than rats. We are worse than "beasts" in our behavior.

Do ducks commit rape? I have never observed that particular family of ducks, and I do not know if they do or do not. Perhaps so. But I do know that if rape occurs in the animal world, it is uncommon. Not so with us. In the human race it is frightfully common. Or again, I do not know if baboons actually kill their young. They may. But they do not systematically murder them for their own convenience, as we do.

Is There a Bottom Rung?

Everything I have been describing to this point has concerned the downhill passage of the human race when it turns away from God, based on Romans 1:32, the last verse of this first great section of Paul's letter. This verse describes the nadir of man's fall. I have called it the lowest point, the worst point on the downward sliding scale.

But is it really the lowest point? Is it the bottom? Or *is* there a bottom? Is there a point beyond which sin will not go?

I have asked this last question from time to time in terms of our declining western culture—not so much in an absolute sense but in terms of the moral sensibilities of our nation. I have asked, "Is there a point at which we will pull back from our increasingly rapid decline and

say, 'This is where we stop; this is terrible; this is a point beyond which we will not go'?" Is there such a point in our culture?

If there is, it is certainly not adultery. We have plenty of that.

It is not prostitution. In fact, prostitution is actually legal in some places.

It is not pornography, though Christians have been opposing pornography effectively in some areas.

Where is the point beyond which our culture does not want to go?

I have noticed that in recent years there has been an attempt to define this point at the place where perversions impinge upon children. The argument would go, "It is not possible to forbid anything to adults as long as they want to do something or consent with each other to do it. But we must not allow these things to affect children. Pornography? Yes, but not child pornography. Prostitution? Yes, but not child prostitution." That sounds good, of course. It gives us the feeling that we are both tolerant—God forbid that we should be intolerant—and moral. But it is sheer hypocrisy. I remember noticing, the first time I was beginning to think along these lines, that at the very time articles were appearing to protest against child pornography and child prostitution, a movie appeared starring Brooke Shields, who was only twelve years old at the time but who played the part of a child prostitute in a brothel in New Orleans at the turn of the century. It was called *Pretty Baby.* Certain elements of the media suggested that the young actress "matured" through her experience.

Do you see what I am saying? When we are sliding downhill we delude ourselves into thinking that we are only going to dip into sin a little bit or at least that there are points beyond which we will never go, lines we will never cross. But this is sheer fantasy. When we start down that downhill path, there are no points beyond which we will not go and no lines we will not choose to cross—if we live long enough. And even if

we die, hell (as I commented in the previous study) is merely our continuing along this dismal, destructive, downhill path forever.

God's Image Restored

I do not want to leave this section with us at the edge of this awful bottomless pit, however. It is true that our rejection of God has left us looking to the beasts and becoming increasingly like them—indeed, even worse than the beasts—and that left to ourselves there can be no end to this grim descent into depravity. But the gospel, for the sake of which Romans was written, tells us that God has not left us to ourselves. In Christ, he has acted to restore what we are intent on destroying.

I see this in five steps:

1. We were made in God's image.
2. We rejected God in Adam and therefore lost that image; we became, not like God, knowing good and evil, but like Satan.
3. Having lost the image of God and having ceased to become increasingly like him, we became like beasts and, as I have been pointing out here, even worse than beasts.
4. Christ became like us, taking a human form upon himself.
5. He died for us and opened up the possibility of our renewal after his image.

Paul writes about this in 2 Corinthians 3, first speaking of a veil that has come between ourselves and God, and then adding: "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.... And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (vv. 16, 18).

When we come to Christ, the question is not "How low can you go?" We are done with that. The question is "How high can you rise?" And to

that question the answer also is: no limit. We are to become increasingly like the Lord Jesus Christ throughout eternity.

Chapter 23.
The First Excuse: Morality

Romans 2:1-3

At first glance the opening words of Romans 2 seem redundant—an echo of what we have already seen in the letter. In Romans 1:20, after Paul has explained how men and women suppress the truth about God, which God has revealed in nature, Paul concludes by saying, "So... men are without excuse." Now he says the same thing—"You, therefore, have no excuse"—as he continues to build the case that all persons, whoever they are or whatever they have or have not done, are under God's judgment.

Paul is not being redundant, of course, as we will see. But even if he were, the point of the repetition is well taken. Paul's repetition dramatizes the fact that human beings never seem able fully to admit their wrongdoing and never tire of making excuses for their bad behavior. Dale Carnegie, in his perennial best seller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, bases his approach to people-management on the premise that others rarely admit to having done anything wrong and that it is therefore pointless to criticize them. My favorite example from the book is a saying of Al Capone, the Chicago gangland leader who for years was the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "Public Enemy Number One." Capone was as sinister as they come, a hardened killer. But he said of himself, "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them to have a good time, and all I get is abuse, the existence of a hunted man."

Carnegie's point, and mine as well, is that people habitually attempt to excuse their wrong behavior. If as hardened a man as Al Capone

thought well of himself, how much more do the normal, "morally upright" people of our society think well of themselves!

Jew or Gentile

This is why Romans 2 was written. In Romans 1, Paul has shown that the human race has turned away from God in order to pursue its own way and that the horrible things we do and see about us are the result. All have become part of this rebellion. Later on (in Romans 3:10-11), he is going to conclude:

> *As it is written:*
> *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
> *All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."*

No one wants to admit that, however. So, instead of acknowledging that what Paul said about the human race is true, most of us make excuses, arguing that although Paul's description may be true of other people, particularly very debased individuals or the heathen, it is certainly not true of us. "We know better than that," we say. "And we act better, too." In the second chapter of Romans Paul is going to disabuse us of these erroneous ideas.

But who is it who thinks like this? To whom particularly is Paul speaking when he says in verse 1: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else"?

There has been a great deal of discussion of this among commentators. Some maintain that in Romans 2:1-16 Paul is addressing the "virtuous heathen," that is, the particularly moral or upright persons of his society. Others maintain that he is thinking of Jews. Later on, of course, Paul does mention Jews specifically—"Now you, if you call yourself a Jew..." (v. 17)—but the question is whether he is also thinking of Jews at the start of the chapter. If he is not, he is dealing with three classes of people: (1) pagans in chapter 1; (2) moral or virtuous people in 2:116; and (3) religious people or Jews in 2:17-29. If he *is* thinking of Jews, he

is dealing with two classes of people: (1) Gentiles in chapter 1; and (2) Jews in chapter 2.

The reformers, John Calvin among them, took the former view. Calvin wrote, "This rebuke is directed at the hypocrites who draw attention by their displays of outward sanctity, and even imagine that they have been accepted by God, as though they had afforded him full satisfaction." He distinguishes between "sanctimonious persons" and those guilty of "the grosser vices."

Today most commentators believe that Paul was thinking of Jews throughout the chapter, even though he does not mention Jews specifically until later. John Murray is an example. He finds four reasons for this position:

1. "The propensity to judge the Gentiles for their religious and moral perversity was peculiarly characteristic of the Jew."
2. "The person being addressed is the participant of 'the riches of his [God's] goodness and forbearance and longsuffering,'" and this applies to Jews more than to Gentiles.
3. "The argument of the apostle is... that special privilege or advantage does not exempt from the judgment of God." This fits Jews particularly.
4. "The express address to the Jew in verse 17 would be rather abrupt if now for the first time the Jew is directly in view, whereas if the Jew is the person in view in the preceding verses then the more express identification in verse 17 is natural."

Support of this position is fairly strong today, as I have indicated. Yet I am not fully convinced. Murray argues that Jews were particularly prone to judge Gentiles. But I would argue that, although that was true, it is nevertheless also a basic human characteristic, practiced by Gentiles on one another as well as by Jews on Gentiles. Again, Murray thinks that "the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering" describes Jews more than Gentiles. But I think a broader

reference is required by the thrust of chapter 1. It is because of God's longsuffering that the people described in chapter 1 are still living and not in hell. Likewise, I would argue that the "special privilege" Murray refers to in his third argument does not actually come in until later, when the Jews *are* being considered. As to the fourth argument, that the reference to Jews in verse 17 is too abrupt, I feel that it is no more abrupt than the way verse 1 introduces those "who pass judgment on someone else."

I think Paul first introduces those, both Jew and Gentile, who consider themselves above others, and then, midway through the chapter, those, in this case Jews particularly, who rely on their religious advantages.

Let me say, however, that in a sense it does not matter much. If Paul is thinking of Jews in verses 1-16, he is at least thinking of them in regard to their morally superior attitude, from which we are not exempt, though we be Gentiles. And if he is thinking of Gentiles, he is at least embracing Jews at the point at which they might indulge in similarly wrong thinking.

What's Wrong with Morality?

Paul has described the race as being under the wrath of God, and he has shown the depths to which our rebellion against God has led us. He has not minced words. He has described the race as being "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.... full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.... gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom. 1:29-31). This is a dreadful denunciation, and at this point someone, perhaps everyone, reacts by saying that although that description of vice may fit other individuals, it certainly does not fit him. "I am not like this," he might say.

It would be perfectly proper if Paul had answered such an objector by pointing out that the important question is not whether he or she has done the specific blameworthy things mentioned, but whether the

person measures up to the perfect standard of God. God, being perfect, cannot be satisfied with anything less than perfection. That important point, which Paul is also quite capable of making, means that we fall short of this divine standard and are therefore deserving of judgment, however good we may be.

But that is not the way Paul answers. Paul does not let the objecting person off the hook by acknowledging, somewhat reluctantly, that he (or she) may indeed be innocent of the vices mentioned, but that he nevertheless falls short of God's righteous, higher standard. On the contrary, Paul argues that the objector is guilty of these very things—perhaps even more guilty than the pagans to whom he feels superior. The very fact that this supposedly moral person is objecting shows that he has some kind of moral conscience. He "passes judgment on someone else" in declaring the other's actions bad, as distinct from his own actions, which are good. But this does not mean that he is innocent of what he sees and condemns in others. On the contrary, he is guilty of these very actions: "... at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (v. 1).

Paul is not appealing to God's standard as that by which self-styled moral individuals will be judged, though he had every right to do so. Rather, he is appealing to their own standard, whatever it is.

Condemned by Any Standard

This is worth thinking through carefully. What are the standards by which you or I might judge sin in others?

1. *The Ten Commandments.* The most widely acknowledged standard of morality, at least in the western world, is the Decalogue, containing what most of us call the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus 20 (cf. Deut. 5:6-21). Much civil law is based on it. For example, when we pass laws recognizing the responsibility of children to obey their parents up to a certain age, we are affirming the fifth of the Ten Commandments, which says, "Honor your father and your mother" (v.

12). When we pass laws against killing, even by such things as excessive speed on the highways, we are affirming the sixth commandment, which says, "You shall not murder" (v. 13). We have laws protecting marriages and against adultery, laws against stealing other people's property, laws against perjury, and so on. These laws grow out of a common recognition of the moral principles embodied in the Ten Commandments.

"Well, that is what we are talking about," says someone. "Paul's condemnation of sin in Romans
1 might have been proper in that far-off heathen context. But it does not apply to us. We have the Ten Commandments and do not do that for which the pagans are condemned." Don't we? Don't you?

You appeal to the fifth commandment, which requires you to honor your father and your mother. But have you never dishonored your parents? Have you never spoken to them in a dishonoring way? Acted in a dishonoring way? Have you always been properly thankful, respectful, and obedient to them?

You appeal to the sixth commandment, which forbids murder, and you feel good about this because you have never actually murdered anybody. But have you forgotten that God looks on the heart and judges by thoughts and wishes as well as by actions? Have you never been angry enough with somebody to want to murder that person? Jesus said on one occasion that even speaking a defamatory word is sufficient to incur God's wrath for breaking this commandment (Matt. 5:21-22).

You appeal to the seventh commandment, but are you guiltless here? This commandment forbids adultery; but many have done this, and others have desired it or contemplated it. Jesus said that we are guilty of this even if we only lust after another person (Matt. 5:28).

Have you never stolen? Never shaded the figures on your income tax in order to pay less than you actually owed? Never kept the change when you were given more than you should have received? Never borrowed

something and then failed to return it, even though you remembered it later?

Have you never lied? Never misrepresented the truth?

And what about the commands I did not even mention the first time around? What about the tenth of the commandments, which says that we must not "covet"? To covet means to want something that someone else has just because he or she has it and you do not. There is no one in our society who is innocent of this, because our entire advertising and marketing industry is based on it.

There are also the four commandments that make up the first table of the law, those that deal with God and our responsibility to worship him. Who has never placed another god before God? Who has never made an idol of something? Who has not misused God's name? Who has remembered even a single Sabbath day, not to mention every Sabbath day, by keeping it holy?

If you say, "My standard is the morality of the Ten Commandments," you are condemned by this standard.

2. *The Sermon on the Mount.* There may be people who have followed my argument to this point but are still not convinced how useless it is to make excuses. They might admit the force of judgments based on the Ten Commandments. "But," they might say, "that was another age and a particularly difficult set of standards. We live in the Christian era now, and I go by the teachings of the gentle Jesus. My standard is the Sermon on the Mount."

If anybody thinks this way, that person's thinking proves how little he or she really understands Christ's sermon. For the Sermon on the Mount does not weaken the Old Testament standards; it rescues them. I have already made that clear in using Matthew 5 to interpret murder and adultery properly. The Sermon on the Mount shows that God is not satisfied with mere external adherence to his laws but requires an inner conformity as well. Our hearts and minds also must be purified.

However, I suppose that what most persons have in mind if they appeal to the Sermon on the Mount, are the Beatitudes, with which it begins. Jesus said:

> *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
> *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
> *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
> *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*
> *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*
> *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*
> *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

Matthew 5:3-10

Most "moral" people see themselves in this description. They think themselves meek, merciful, pure, peacemakers. They imagine that they actually thirst for righteousness and are even sometimes persecuted because of it. But who really embodies these characteristics? Is it anyone you know? Hardly! The only person who has ever really embodied them is the one who spoke them: Jesus of Nazareth. He was gentle in spirit; he mourned for sin; he was meek, merciful, and pure; he alone embodied righteousness—and he suffered for it.

You see my point. If Jesus has shown what it means to keep the standards of the Sermon on the Mount, then none of us has done it. And so, if we appeal to the Sermon on the Mount as the measure by which we judge others and put ourselves above them, we condemn ourselves, as Paul indicates.

3. *The Golden Rule.* "But wait a minute," someone interrupts. "You have referred to the Beatitudes as an important part of Jesus' teaching, and that is right. But it is not all he taught, even in this sermon. What about the 'heart' of the sermon: the Golden Rule. What is wrong with the part that goes: 'In everything, do to others

what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets' (Matt. 7:12)?"

Is that the part by which you judge others and by which you want to be judged? Have you always treated others exactly as you have wanted them to treat you? Have you never been impatient with them? Never gotten angry with them unjustly? Never accused them falsely? Never taken advantage of another's weakness? The Golden Rule accuses you, as it must if it is truly the summation of the law, as Jesus teaches.

4. *Fair Play.* Let me try once more. What about the "Englishman's virtue," as some have called it. What about the simple, rock-bottom standard of fair play? The point is obvious. There is no one who is ever fair to other people always and in all ways.

Calling Sinners to Repentance

A number of years ago Thomas A. Harris wrote a book of pop psychology called *I'm O.K., You're O.K.,* and about that time the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology was holding its annual meetings on the depravity of man. One of the speakers was John H. Gerstner, Professor Emeritus of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He used the book as a jumping-off place for the following story.

Gerstner and his wife had been in Kashmir, and they were returning from a shopping expedition in a little boat that had just pulled up beside a larger junk near the shore. There was a bump, and some water splashed on them. The owner of the boat got very agitated and gestured for them to get out. Gerstner told how he remembered saying to his wife, "See how excitable this fellow is.

We get a little water splashed on us, and you would think it was a catastrophe of the first order." The man got more and more agitated. "It's okay, Kusra," Gerstner said. "It's okay."

Finally, the owner of the boat got so excited that he broke out of the dialect he had been using, which the Gerstners had been unable to understand, and shouted, "It no okay!"

At this they got the message and climbed onto the shore. The owner then threw his grandchild up to them and climbed out himself. When they turned around, the boat was gone. The hull had been punctured, and the undertow had swallowed their craft. It was eventually tossed up about six boats further on; if the Gerstners had delayed a moment longer, they would have been swallowed up with it.

That is the message of these early chapters of Romans: "I am not O.K. You are not O.K. No one is O.K." And the sooner we admit that we are *not* okay and turn to the One who knows that we are not, but who offers us a way of salvation anyway, the better off we will be. Jesus does not excuse us; he forgives us. He calls us sinners. Yet he says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). The most important thing in life is to know that Jesus is able to save you from sin. The second most important thing is to know that you require it.

Chapter 24.
The Long-Suffering God

Romans 2:4

In my library in Philadelphia I have a large number of books that deal with the attributes of God.
They are among my favorite volumes. I think, for example, of A. W. Tozer's books on knowing God: *The Pursuit of God* and *The Knowledge of the Holy*. Or Arthur Pink's studies of God's character: *The Attributes of God* and *Gleanings in the Godhead.* Some are heavy theological works, like Emil Brunner's *The Christian Doctrine of God,* Herman Bavinck's *The Doctrine of God* and Carl F. H. Henry's multivolumed *God, Revelation and Authority.* There is also the welldeserved popular favorite: *Knowing God,* by J. I. Packer.

I find as I look over these books that there is little in them concerning two of the three attributes we are to study in this chapter: tolerance (forbearance) and patience (longsuffering). Why is this? Pink calls

attention to it, saying, "It is not easy to suggest a reason... for surely the longsuffering of God is as much one of the divine perfections as is his wisdom, power or holiness, and as much to be admired and revered by us."

The reason many of us ignore these attributes may be precisely what Paul suggests it may be, when he asks in our text, "Do you show contempt for the riches of his [God's] kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" The reason why we do not think often of God's tolerance and patience is our insensitivity to sin and our reluctance to turn from it.

The Goodness of God

I have said that two of the three attributes mentioned in our text are frequently neglected:
tolerance and patience. But the first of the three attributes is "goodness" (KJV), or "kindness" (NIV), and goodness is not usually ignored. I suppose this is because goodness is so desirable a part of God's nature. Our word *God* points in that direction. It comes to us from Anglo-Saxon speech, where "God" originally meant "The Good." This was an important insight, for it meant that in the minds of the Anglo-Saxons, God was not only "the Greatest" of all beings, though they recognized that as well, but that he was also "the Best." All the goodness there is originates in God. That is why the apostle James could write, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). In the language of philosophy the simplest of all definitions of God is *summum bonum*, the chief good.

Yet, when Paul speaks of the goodness of God in Romans 2, he is not thinking of this as having to do primarily with what God is in himself, but as having to do with God's actions toward us. This may be why the New International Version renders the Greek term *chrēstotēs* (later, *chrēstos*) as "kindness" rather than "goodness," as it is in the King James Bible.

1. *Creation.* The first place at which the goodness of God is seen is in creation. We remember that on each of the successive days of creation, after God had made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the land, and all the creatures that live in the sea, inhabit the land, and fly in the air, God said, "It is good." And it really was good—and continues to be, in spite of the increasing spoilage of creation that has come to it because of human sin.

The world about us is good, and this is a great proof of God's goodness. Every time we breathe God's good air, we demonstrate how indebted we are to this goodness. Every time we use the resources of the world to make homes and clothes and to grow food, we show that God is kind toward us. And what of our bodies? How suited are our hands to perform useful work! How valuable are our arms and legs! How amazing our eyes! How marvelous our minds! Paul Brand's study of the wonders of the human body—cells, bones, skin, and motion—*Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, highlights some of this goodness.

2. *Providence.* God's goodness is also revealed in providence, that is, by his continual ordering of the world and world events for good. Providence is seen in what theologians call "common grace. "Jesus spoke of this when he observed that God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).

3. *The Gospel Call.* But the kindness of God toward us is seen not only in the physical creation and providence. It is also seen in many spiritual matters. Above all, it is seen in the widespread proclamation of the gospel. To be sure, the gospel has not yet penetrated everywhere. There are still many millions of people who have not heard that Jesus loves them and has died for them. But *you* have! You at least know God's goodness in the gospel.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, wrote on Romans 2:4:

Myriads of our fellow men have never had an opportunity of knowing Christ. The missionary's foot has never trodden the cities wherein they dwell, and so they die in the dark. Multitudes are going downward, downward; but they do not know the upward road. Their minds have never been enlightened by the teachings of God's word, and hence they sin with less grievousness of fault. You are placed in the very focus of Christian light, and yet you follow evil! Will you not think of this? Time was when a man would have to work for years to earn enough money to buy a Bible. There were times when he could not have earned one even with that toil. Now the word of God lies upon your table, and you have a copy of it in almost every room of your house. Is not this a boon from God? This is the land of the open Bible, and the land of the preached word of God. In this you prove the richness of God's goodness. Do you despise this wealth of mercy?... Is this a small thing?

The kindness of God is not a small thing. We dare not despise it, as Paul tells us.

The Tolerance of God

The second attribute of God in our text is tolerance, and this, as I wrote earlier, *is* frequently neglected. The Greek word is *anochēs*, variously translated "tolerance," "forbearance," "holding back," "delay," "pause," or "clemency."

The new idea introduced by this term is that of human offense to God's goodness, offense that should evoke an immediate outpouring of fierce judgment but which God actually endures. We see this quality at the beginning of the Bible. God had warned Adam that on the day he ate of the forbidden tree he would die (Gen. 1:17). But when God came to Adam and Eve in the garden to confront our first parents with the fact of their disobedience, he did not actually execute the sentence. Someone has pointed out that Adam and Eve did die in their spirits, which they proved by running away from God when he came calling. That is true. But they did not die physically, at least not at once. And they never did die eternally, because God came with an offer of salvation through a future deliverer who would defeat Satan, which they

then believed and trusted. This first great outcropping of sin and God's dealings with it show God's tolerance.

So it is with us all. We sin, but God does not immediately implement the judgment we deserve. He bears with us, enduring the affront to his great majesty and holiness. And he offers us salvation!

The irony is that we do not appreciate this and instead actually turn God's temporary tolerance of some sin into an accusation against him. Do you remember the question raised by those who had witnessed a few instances of evil in the days of Jesus Christ? Apparently some Galileans had been visiting Jerusalem and had been worshiping at the temple. While they were in the midst of their pious acts, soldiers from Pilate fell upon them and killed some of them. Again, about this same time a tower fell over and killed eighteen persons who were standing beside it. Jesus was asked how it was possible that something like this could happen in a world ruled by a just yet merciful God. Was it because these people were worse sinners than others? Or was it because God was either too weak to avert the tragedies or just didn't care?

Jesus replied, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:2-5).

Jesus' point was that our way of asking that question is entirely wrong. The question is not why God somehow "lets down" and allows others to perish, but rather why he has spared us, we being the sinners we are. If we could understand how sinful we are, we could understand that the soldiers should have killed us, or the tower should have fallen on us. We should be dead and in hell this very instant. That we are not in hell is an evidence of God's tolerance. He has not yet confined us to the punishment we deserve. God's tolerance should lead us to repentance, before it is too late.

The Patience of God

The last of these three attributes is the greatest from the point of view of our text, for it is linked to the call for repentance in that God spares us for a very long time that we might do so. The Greek word *makrothymia* is interesting, because the first half of it, *makro* (macro), emphasizes how great God's longsuffering, or patience, is.

Here is a good place to put these three terms together and compare them. I quote first from Robert Haldane. He thinks these words apply to the Jews explicitly, which I do not. But his definitions and contrasts are significant nevertheless: "Goodness imports the benefits which God hath bestowed on the Jews. Forbearance denotes God's bearing with them, without immediately executing vengeance—his delaying to punish them.... Long-suffering signifies the extent of that forbearance during many ages." Here is another quotation, from Charles Hodge: "The first means kindness in general, as expressed in giving favors; the second, patience; the third, forbearance, slowness in the infliction of punishment."

I would define each of these three terms as aspects of God's goodness: the first as goodness to man without any specific relationship to sin; the second as goodness in relation to sin's magnitude; the third as goodness in relation to sin's endurance or continuation. Spurgeon was thinking along these lines when he wrote, "Forbearance has to do with the magnitude of sin; longsuffering with the multiplicity of it."

"Patience" means that God bears with sin a long time. Here are some examples:

First, God was patient with those who sinned in the early ages of the race before the great flood.

This was a particularly evil time. Some of the evil is described in Genesis 4, which begins with Cain's murder of his brother Abel and ends with Lamech's boast about having killed a man just for wounding him. This evil is summarized in Genesis 6:5, where we are told, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and

that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." What a devastating statement—"only evil all the time"! This was a dreadful age. Yet, in spite of this great evil, God was patient with the antediluvian generation. He spared it for 120 years while Noah was in the process of constructing and outfitting the ark. It was only at the end of that period, after ample warnings from Noah and the other pre-flood preachers, like Enoch, that the flood came.

A second example is Israel, with whom God was exceptionally patient. He was patient with the
Jews for forty years in the wilderness, as Paul reminds us in a sermon to Gentiles and Jews at Antioch ("He endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert," Acts 13:18). Later, when the Israelites entered the Promised Land and were soon found following the debased customs and worship of the nations around them, God did not immediately chastise his people but instead sent a long line of deliverers. Even when their sin was so great that a judgment by invasion and deportment was inevitable, God still sent generations of prophets to warn both Israel and Judah and turn them from sin.

What of ourselves? Arthur W. Pink writes:

How wondrous is God's patience with the world today. On every side people are sinning with a high hand. The divine law is trampled under foot and God himself openly despised. It is truly amazing that he does not instantly strike dead those who so brazenly defy him. Why does he not suddenly cut off the haughty infidel and blatant blasphemer, as he did Ananias and Sapphira? Why does he not cause the earth to open its mouth and devour the persecutors of his people, so that, like Dathan and Abiram, they shall go down alive into the Pit? And what of apostate Christendom, where every possible form of sin is now tolerated and practiced under cover of the holy name of Christ? Why does not the righteous wrath of heaven make an end of such abominations? Only one answer is possible: because God bears with "*much* longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction."

Repent or Perish

Yet, much as I appreciate Arthur Pink and value his description of God's longsuffering toward those of our own time, I do not think his statement that "only one answer is possible" is correct. Pink asks, "Why does God not immediately destroy all wrong doers?" He answers, "Because God is longsuffering toward the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction." That means: simply because God *is* longsuffering. Sinners will perish eventually anyway, but God is nevertheless willing to endure them for a very long time.

Well, that is part of the answer. God does endure for a long time those who eventually will perish. But if our text—which speaks so eloquently of the goodness, tolerance, and patience of God—means anything, it certainly means that God also has quite another purpose in his patience. Paul says that it is to lead us to repentance.

There are two ways we can go, of course. Paul is clear about them. One way is repentance, the way Scripture urges. The other is defiance, or spite toward God's goodness.

Which will it be for you? You can defy God. You can set yourself against his goodness, tolerance, and patience—as well as against his other attributes like sovereignty, holiness, omniscience, and immutability, which you also despise. But why should you do that? I have previously pointed out that it is quite understandable how a sinner who does not wish to leave his or her sin must hate God's holiness. It is obvious that a rebellious subject will resent God's sovereignty. But why should you "show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience"? These are winsome qualities. A kind, tolerant, and patient God is a good God. Why should you fail to realize that God's exercise of these attributes toward you is for a good end?

I want to give you three reasons why you should allow these attributes to lead you to repentance and should no longer despise the goodness of God.

First, if God is a good God, then whatever you may think to the contrary in your fallen state, to find this good God will mean finding all good for yourself. You do not normally think this way. You think that your own will is the good. You think that if you have to turn from what you think you want—and desperately do want—you will be miserable. Can you not see that it is your own sinful way, and the ways of millions of other people just like you, that is the cause of your miseries. God is not the cause. God is good. God is the source of all good. If you want to find good for yourself as well as others, the way to find it is to turn from whatever is holding you back and find God. God has provided the way for you to turn to him through the death of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He died for your sin to open the door to God's presence.

Not long ago I was talking to a young girl who had gotten into trouble because of her rebellion against nearly everyone who was in authority over her, had ended up in an institution for troubled teenagers, and had had a very rough time. But in the counseling and small-group sessions she learned something important. As we talked she said, "I learned that the people I thought were my enemies were actually my friends, because they told me the truth, and I learned that my trouble was not caused by other people. I caused it. If I am going to get anywhere, I have to change."

This teenager had become a lot smarter than many people who fight against God by blaming him for their misery. If you are to be wise and not foolish, you must allow the goodness of God to lead you to repentance.

Second, if God is tolerant of you, it is because he has a will to save you. If he wanted to condemn you outright, he could have done it long ago. If he is tolerant, you will find that if you come to him he will not cast you out. One commentator wrote, "If God is good even to the unkind and the unthankful, surely the door of entrance to the divine favor is open to the penitent."

Third, if God is patient with you in spite of your many follies, it is because he is giving you an opportunity to be saved. The apostle Peter

wrote, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). If God were not good, you might have room to doubt this. You might think of God as a cat playing with a mouse. You might think of him as being patient with you only for his own amusement. But this is not the case at all. If God is good in his patience, his reason for being so must be to do good. His patience must be to give you opportunity to turn to him. Do not make the mistake of thinking that because God is tolerant he will not judge sin. God will judge it. He is just, as well as patient. But now he is patient, and if he has allowed you to live twenty, forty, or even eighty or ninety years, it is so that you might come to him now—before you die and the opportunity for salvation is gone forever.

Paul says that God's goodness "leads" you to repentance. If he is leading, he will not turn you away if you follow him. If he bids you repent, he will not spurn your repentance.

Chapter 25.
Wrath Stored Up

Romans 2:5

In Romans 2:5 we come for a second time to the idea of the wrath of God, and for the second time we need to defend wrath as a proper element in God's character. It is strange this should be so.

Several years ago newspapers reported the discovery of a "house of horrors" in north
Philadelphia. A man named Gary Heidnik had been luring prostitutes and other rootless women to his home, imprisoning and torturing them, and finally killing some. When his crimes were uncovered, two women were found chained to the walls of the basement, and body parts of others were discovered in Heidnik's refrigerator. Heidnik was criminally insane, of course. But the interesting thing about this case is that much of the outrage it engendered was directed, not so much at this man, who

was obviously insane, but at the police, who had been alerted to the strange goings-on in the house earlier by neighbors but had done nothing. The police maintained that until they were finally told about Heidnik by a woman who had been in his home but had escaped, they did not have "probable cause" to interfere.

The position of the police may have been technically and legally correct, of course. But the point I am making is that people naturally feel that evil demands both intervention and outrage, and they are deeply upset if this does not happen. If nothing is done or if the situation is allowed to continue unchallenged for a long time, the outrage is intensified!

Why are we unwilling to grant the rightness of a similar outrage to God. The only possible reason is that we consider our sins and those of most other people to be excusable—forgetting that in the sight of the holy God they are not much different from those of Gary Heidnik. They are measured not by our own relative and wavering standards of good and evil, but by God's absolute and utterly upright criteria.

Wrath Revealed

The first time we came in Romans to the idea of the wrath of God, we were at the beginning of the first great section of the letter. There Paul wrote, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18). This is a thematic verse and therefore very important, for it is saying that the wrath of God is not something merely saved up until some long-delayed but final day of judgment, but rather is something that God has been revealing to us even now. Romans 2:5 is going to say that there is also a day of wrath to come, but the first thing Paul says about God's wrath is that it is already being revealed from heaven.

This means that the wrath of God is a very real thing. Moreover, we can know the certainty of a future day of wrath by noting the past and present revelation of that wrath.

How has the wrath of God been revealed? Robert Haldane says:

It was revealed when the sentence of death was first pronounced, the earth cursed, and man driven out of the earthly paradise, and afterward by such examples of punishment as those of the deluge, and the destruction of the cities of the plain by fire from heaven.... But, above all, the wrath of God was revealed from heaven when the Son of God came down to manifest the divine character, and when that wrath was displayed in his sufferings and death, in a manner more awful than by all the tokens God had before given of his displeasure against sin. Besides this, the future and eternal punishment of the wicked is now declared in terms more solemn and explicit than formerly. Under the new dispensation, there are two revelations given from heaven, one of wrath, the other of grace.

I do not anywhere know a statement regarding the nature of the revelation of God's wrath that is more complete or accurate than this statement by Haldane. Yet, in Romans 1, Paul's point is that the wrath of God is revealed to us chiefly in the debilitating downward drag of sin upon our lives. We think when we sin that we can sin "just a little bit." But we cannot! Sin captures us and pulls us down inexorably, until—if we are allowed to continue in sin long enough—we end up calling what is good, evil and what is evil, good. And we perish utterly!

This means that the moral turmoil and chaos of the world, including our own personal world, is evidence that the wrath of God is no fiction. This is something to be gravely concerned about.

Wrath Deserved

In Romans 2:5, Paul has other things to say about wrath, and his first point is that the wrath of God toward the sin of men and women is deserved. That should be perfectly evident by now, of course—at least if we have understood the argument of Romans 1. God's wrath is deserved, because our ignorance of God is a willful ignorance and our refusal to seek him out and worship him is a willful refusal. We have already seen that God has revealed his existence and power in nature

and that this alone should be sufficient to lead every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth to give thanks to God. But we do not do it, and the fact that we do not do it is proof that we do not want to.

But the case is even stronger than this, which is what Paul is chiefly teaching in chapter 2. Romans 1 declared God's wrath on the basis of the evidence for the existence of God in nature, which we refuse to acknowledge. Chapter 2 goes beyond this, with verse 5, our text here, speaking of the wrath of God as coming to us because of our stubborn refusal to repent.

The word *repent* takes us back to verse 4. For in that verse Paul has spoken of two paths open to human beings as a result of God's kindness, tolerance, and patience. One path is the path of contempt for God's blessings. The other path, the one Paul recommends, is repentance. Paul argues that the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God are to lead us to repentance. But will this happen? Is it happening now? The answer appears in verse 5, where Paul speaks of our "stubborn" and "unrepentant" hearts. Apparently, the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God do not have the effect by themselves of leading men and women to repentance. On the contrary, those who have already suppressed the truth about God revealed in nature now add to their evil a hardening of their hearts against the kindnesses that have been bestowed upon them for their good.

So the wrath of God against the race is deserved on two counts: (1) we have rejected the natural revelation; and (2) we have shown contempt for God's patience and kind acts.

Wrath Proportionate to Sin

In my judgment, the most important teaching in this verse is that the wrath of God is proportionate to human sin, in the sense that those who sin much will be punished much and that those who sin less will be punished less. This has been a problem for some Christian people who have thought of hell's punishments as being poured out on unbelievers only because of their adamant refusal to accept Jesus Christ. Since that

sin—a great sin, to be sure—seems to be the same for everybody, the punishments of hell should be equal, such persons feel.

But this is not correct. For one thing, even the basic premise is in error, for not everyone has a chance to hear of Jesus Christ, and therefore not all will be punished for refusing to believe on him. We saw this in our study of Romans 1, when we dealt with whether it is just for God to condemn those who, like the natives in a far-off island jungle, have never had a chance to hear the gospel. We saw there that God does not condemn people for failing to do what they did not even know they should do, but rather for failing to follow the revelation they do have. The native is condemned, not for failing to believe on Jesus, about whom he has never heard, but for failing to seek God out on the basis of the revelation of God found in nature.

If this is true, however, as it is, then it also follows that some people are more guilty than others and must be punished accordingly. The native is perhaps least guilty, in spite of what we may regard as his particularly debased worship and immoral practices. The person who has heard of Jesus but has refused to come to God through faith in Jesus Christ is more guilty. He has rejected not one but two sources of revelation: the revelation in nature and the special revelation of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ disclosed in Scripture.

What of those, like ourselves, who have heard the gospel repeatedly and have even seen its power demonstrated in the lives of other persons? If we refuse that repeated and amplified revelation, we are the guiltiest of all.

There is an interesting image suggested by Paul's language at this point, for Paul speaks of the stubborn and unrepentant person "storing up wrath" for the day of God's judgment. It is the image of a greedy individual, a miser, who has been storing up wealth which, contrary to his expectations, is destined to destroy him. I think of this man as storing up a great horde of gold coins, placing them in an attic above his bed where he thinks no one will find them and where they will be safe. He keeps this up for years, amassing a great weight of gold. But one

day, while he is sleeping and oblivious to his danger, this great weight of gold breaks through the ceiling of his bedroom, comes crashing down onto his bed, and kills him. He thought of his wealth as salvation, but it was death.

That is the way it is for those who pile sin upon sin and show contempt for God's kindness. They think of their sins as building up a life of future happiness and freedom. But each sin is actually a storing up of wrath. Haldane says, "A man is rich according to his treasures." Therefore, "the wicked will be punished according to the number and aggravation of their sins." This is true even of the good we receive and enjoy without giving proper thanks to God.

Each little indulgence of sin is a coin of wrath stored up.

Each neglect of others is a saved-up ingot of anger.

Each angry word, each selfish thought, each mean retort, each harmful act, is a piling up of wrath's treasures.

Each pleasure enjoyed without genuine thanks to God builds wrath.

Each year of grace, each day enjoyed without the experience of God's swift and immediate judgment, each moment of indifference to the mercy of God, is wrath's accumulation.

If life has been good to you, you only increase your guilt and build a treasure of future punishment by ignoring God's kindness.

Certain Wrath

There is another thought about wrath in verse 5, and it is that the wrath of God against sin is certain. People who spurn God's patience inevitably think that in the end they will somehow get free and escape what they deserve. That is what the people being addressed in this chapter were thinking. They looked at the debased moral practices of the heathen and concluded that they themselves would escape God's wrath because of their imagined superiority to the heathen in such

things. But it is not so, Paul says. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Their very awareness of high moral standards, coupled with their refusal to repent of sin and come to God, intensifies their guilt and assures their final condemnation.

Certainty of judgment is seen in the phrase "the day of God's wrath." Why is the time of the outpouring of the wrath of God called a "day"? In my opinion it is not because it is to unfold in what we would call a twenty-four-hour day, like the day of the invasion of the Normandy beaches in World War II, which one writer called *The Longest Day.* I think the Bible speaks of various and manifold judgments that may actually be spread out over a considerable period of time. The use of the word *day* in the phrase "day of wrath" is similar to its use in the phrase "the day of Jesus Christ." In that phrase the word encompasses the events of a thirty-three-year ministry.

Why, then, is the day of God's wrath called a "day"? It is because it is as fixed in God's calendar as any day you can mention—December 7, 1941, to give just one example. That day is determined! So when the day rolls around, the wrath of God *will* be poured out, whatever you or anyone else may hope to the contrary.

A great German preacher by the name of Walter Luethi wrote:

If the time should ever come (for these things are conceivable nowadays) when we should succeed in demonstrating that black is white and white black, that good is evil and evil good, if we should ever be successful in invalidating the fundamental moral principles of the universe, so that sin were no longer hated and everyone took a fancy to evil, then there would still be a stronghold where evil would be hated, and that is heaven. And there would still be one who has sworn to fight the evil in the world to the last drop of his blood, and that is God, whose "wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men."

Wrath That Is Just

Romans 2:5 makes another point about wrath that we also need to see. God's wrath is a just wrath, not arbitrary or petulant but rather according to "righteous judgment." When Paul mentions judgment he brings in thoughts of God's law and reminds us that the judgment of God will be according to law. Indeed, as he is going to show, those who have done good—it there are any—will receive good from God, while those who have done evil will receive evil.

One great problem with sin is that it leads to self-justification, so that anything that happens to us that we do not like is immediately perceived as being unjust, a reason to fault God for his ordering of the universe. The cry of the rebellious heart is always: "The only thing I want from

God is justice."

God forbid that you should receive justice from God!

The justice of God will condemn you. And the terror of the very thought of justice is that God is indeed a just God. The God of all the earth does do right, as Abraham well knew (cf. Gen. 18:25). Sin is punished now in large measure, and it will be punished fully and equitably in the life to come. Do not ask God for justice. Seek mercy. Seek it where salvation from the wrath of God may alone be found.

Wrath Poured Out

Where is that salvation to be found? If God's wrath is deserved by us, proportionate to our sin, as certain as the calendar, just, and even partially disclosed in the natural unfolding of the effects of sin in our lives, how can it possibly be avoided—since we *are* sinners?

The only place is in Christ, who bore the full measure of the wrath of God in our place. Do we doubt that God's wrath is real and threatening? If we do, we need only look at Jesus in the hours preceding his crucifixion. He was not like Socrates who calmly quaffed the hemlock that was to end his life. Jesus' soul was "troubled" (John 12:27), and he agonized in the Garden of

Gethsemane, asking that the "cup" God had prepared for him might be taken away (Matt. 26:3644). Jesus was not afraid of death. He had as much courage in that respect as Socrates. The reason Jesus trembled before death is that his death was not to be like the death of mere mortals. Jesus was not going to die for himself. He was going to die for others. He was going to take upon himself the full measure of the wrath of God that they deserved. He was to drink the cup of wrath to the very dregs—in order that the justice of God might be satisfied and sinners might be spared.

And so it was!

The time came when Jesus was led away to be crucified. He was hung on the cross, midway between earth and heaven, a bridge between sinful man and a holy God. There he, who knew no sin, was made sin for us. There God's wrath was poured out.

For centuries the wrath that men and women had been storing up had been accumulating—like coins in the attic or water behind a great dam. Oh, here and there a little of the flood of God's judgment had sloshed out over the top as God reached the end of his patience in some small area, and a Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed or a Jerusalem was overthrown. But, for the most part, the wrath of God merely accumulated, growing higher and broader and deeper and increasingly more turbulent. Then Jesus died! When he died the dam was opened, and the great weight of the accumulated wrath of God was poured out upon him. He took God's wrath for us. He bore its impounded fury in our place. No wonder his righteous soul shrank back from the atonement. He had never committed a single sin. He was spotless and without blame. Yet because he was blameless and because he was God, he was able to stand in the breech for us and secure our salvation.

God demonstrated clearly that he had! In Jerusalem there was a temple the central feature of which was a room called the Most Holy Place. God was understood to dwell symbolically in that place. Before it hung a thick curtain, symbolizing the barrier that sin has raised between God in his holiness and ourselves in our sin. For anyone to penetrate beyond

that barrier meant instant death, as occasionally happened, for the wrath of God must flame out against any sin that would intrude upon holiness. That curtain was torn in two when Jesus died. For centuries it had hung there, proclaiming that God was holy, that man was sinful, and that the way to God was therefore strictly barred. But now that Jesus had died for sin, taking the place of any who would trust him and receive the benefit of his sacrifice, the wrath of God was expended, the way was open, and there was nothing left but God's great love and kindness.

This is the gospel. It is what is open to you if you will approach God, not on the basis of your own good deeds or works, which can only condemn you, but on the basis of Christ's having borne the wrath of God in your place.

That wrath is thundering down the chasm of history toward the day of final judgment, and one day it must break upon you unless you stand before God in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther began his spiritual pilgrimage by fearing God's wrath and then came to find peace in Christ. But he never forgot the reality of the final judgment, and he always warned his hearers to flee from it to Christ. He said in one place, "The Last Day is called the day of wrath and of mercy, the day of trouble and of peace, the day of destruction and of glory." Luther was right. It must be one or the other. If it is to be a day of mercy and peace for you, rather than a day of wrath and trouble, it must be because you are trusting in Christ.

Chapter 26.
Good for the Good, Bad for the Bad

Romans 2:6-11

I am sure you have been in situations in which a person, perhaps yourself, has been caught doing something wrong and has immediately begun to make excuses. "I didn't mean to do it," the accused one might say. Or, "But so-and-so did it first." Or, "You just don't understand my circumstances."

It may be the case in any given instance that the person involved really was "innocent," because of his or her motive or because of circumstances. This is one reason why our judicial system takes so much trouble to determine motives and circumstances in criminal cases. Generally, however, the excuses people make are exactly that, excuses, and they need to be seen for what they really are. This is particularly true in our relationships to God. God accuses us of repressing the truth about himself and of violating his moral law even while we pass judgment on others for doing the same things, but as soon as we hear these truths we begin to make excuses. We claim that we did not know what was required of us, that we did not do what we are accused of doing, or that our motives were actually good. Whenever we find ourselves doing this, we need to rediscover the principles of God's just judgment, which Romans 2 explains.

One important principle is that God's judgment is *according to truth* (v. 2). On the basis of this principle alone we find ourselves to be guilty. For God, who is the God of truth, declares that we ourselves do what we find deserving of blame in others.

Another principle is that God's judgment is *according to our deeds* (v. 6). We cannot plead extenuating circumstances with God, because it is what we do that counts. This principle is unfolded in verses 6 through 11 and is developed further in verses 12 through 15.

Two Different Paths

These verses speak of two very different paths. One is the path of good deeds, the end of which is glory, honor, peace, and eternal life. The other is the path of evil, the end of which is trouble, distress, wrath, and anger. The verses teach that a person is on either one path or the other.

Up to this point, particularly as a result of our earlier study of verse 5, a person might conclude that the judgment of God will be a finely graded thing—extending all the way from perfect happiness and bliss on the one hand to utter misery and torment on the other, and that most of us

will fall somewhere in between. This is because of the principle of proportionality in judgment, which we developed from the idea of "storing up wrath" in verse 5. As we look at people, we see that some are better than others, and some are worse. Therefore, we reason, in the life to come some should be treated well, some should be treated badly, *and the differences should be relative.* A person reasoning along these lines might conclude that our future existence in heaven or hell (or whatever) should be somewhat the same as our present existence, which means a mixture of good and bad for most people.

Our text refutes this error. According to these verses, the two paths are mutually exclusive.

The Path of the Just

The first path is that of the person who does good. In our text Paul speaks of such people in two places. Putting together these verses, we have the following: "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he [God] will give eternal life.... There will be... glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (vv. 7, 9-10).

There are two things that such a person is described here as doing: (1) he or she *does good* and (2) *persists in doing good.* There are three things that are highlighted as his or her essential motivation: (1) *glory,* (2) *honor,* and (3) *immortality.* Elsewhere in Paul's writings, these terms are used of the Christian's ultimate expectations. "Glory" refers to the transformation of the believer into the image of God's Son, by which the glory of God will be reflected in that person (cf. Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 30; 9:23; 1 Cor. 2:7; 15:43; 2 Cor. 3:12-18; 4:17). "Honor" refers to God's approval of believers, as contrasted with the dishonor and even scorn accorded to them by the world (cf. Heb. 2:7; 1 Peter 1:7). "Immortality" refers to the resurrection hope of God's people (cf. 1 Cor. 15:42, 50, 52-54). One commentator writes, "The three terms have indisputably in the usage of Paul redemptive associations, and this consideration of itself makes it impossible to think that the eschatological aspiration referred to is anything less than that provided by redemptive revelation. The

three words define aspiration in terms of the highest reaches of Christian hope."

Likewise, there are four things that God is said to dispense to such people as rewards for their aspirations: (1) *eternal life,* (2) *glory,* (3) *honor,* and (4) *peace.* "Eternal life" refers to salvation—life in heaven with God rather than damnation. "Glory" and "honor" are two of the goals the people described are striving for. The last term, "peace," seems to parallel "immortality" and therefore points, not to peace *with* God, which we can enjoy now as the result of Christ's death for us and our resulting justification, or even to that supernatural peace *of* God, which "transcends all understanding" (Phil. 4:7), but to the peace of heaven. It is deliverance from sin and its conflicts.

But here comes the big question. Has anyone ever chosen this path by his or her own will and then walked along it by his or her own strength? Does anyone of himself or herself actually do good and persist in it apart from the gospel?

I have spoken of the aspirations of the one who walks this path being "Christian" aspirations. Therefore, it is a path walked by Christians. But the question I am asking is whether any of us actually choose this path and then persist in it *of ourselves,* that is, unaided by the work of the Holy Spirit in turning us from sin to faith in Christ and by joining us to him. I hope that by this time we know the answer to that question. It is no! No one chooses to do good (as God defines it) or seeks glory, honor, or immortality by the path of rigorous morality. In fact, as we will see when we get to Paul's summation of the human condition in Romans 3:10-12:

As it is written:

> *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
>
> *All have turned away, they have together become worthless;*

there is no one who does good, not even one."

This first path would be a wonderful option if anyone could actually walk along it. But none can! And none do! Therefore, when God judges men and women by an accurate and comprehensive examination of their deeds, as he says he will do, all will be condemned. "For God does not show favoritism" (Rom. 2:11).

The Way of Sinners

The second path is the one all persons naturally take, apart from the intervention of God. It is the way of destruction. Again, Paul speaks of it in two verses of our text. Putting these together we have: "For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (vv. 8-9).

In these verses there are four things that the wicked are said to be or do, which reveal their sinfulness. First, they are "self-seeking." This is the opposite of the first and second "greatest" commandments, which say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.... [and] your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37, 39). It is the sin of Satan who said, "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14b). Second, they "reject the truth." In the context of these early chapters of Romans, this refers to the rejection of the truth of God revealed in nature and, of course, all other rejections of truth that flow from it. Third, such a person "does evil." Romans 1:29-31 was an exposition of what this means, and there are other like passages later on (cf. Rom. 3:13-18). Fourth, they "follow evil." This could mean simply that they *do* evil, but this would be redundant in light of verse 9. Here it probably refers to the continuing downward path of evil described in 1:18-32.

What is the result of these choices? Again, there are four items: "wrath and anger" and "trouble and distress." The first two and the last two closely parallel each other, and there is a relationship between the first pair and the second. "Wrath and anger" both concern God's fierce and absolute opposition to all evil. "Trouble and distress" refer to the effect

of God's resulting judgment upon evildoers. The words are frequently used of the sufferings of the wicked in the life to come (cf. Isa. 8:22; Zeph. 1:15, 17).

This is what awaits the ungodly and why even those who think that they are better than other people also need the gospel.

The Two Paths in Scripture

Many people find this section of Romans to be extremely difficult, for it seems to be saying that salvation is by good works. If you do good and persist in it, you will be saved. If you do evil, you will be lost. This is not what Romans 2:6-11 is saying, of course. No one is saved other than by the work of Jesus Christ and by faith in him. Nevertheless, it is significant that the inspired apostle does speak of two paths, and he does not encourage us to suppose that a person can reach the goal of eternal life without actually being on the path of righteousness.

Should we be surprised at this? Hardly!

This is the message of Psalm 1, which speaks of the righteous man "who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers," but rather delights "in the law of the LORD," and speaks also of the wicked man who is "like chaff that the wind blows away" (vv. 1, 2, 4). This has present implications. But, like Paul's parallel thoughts in Romans, it has eternal implications as well. "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous" (v. 5), and "the wicked will perish" (v. 6).

Matthew 19:16-21 records that the Lord Jesus Christ replied in similar terms to the rich young man who asked him, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

We might have expected Jesus to reply that the man should have faith in him. But instead Jesus said to obey the commandments: "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as

yourself.'" The young man thought he had already done this. "All these I have kept," he said.

Again, instead of telling him to have faith in himself or even pointing out that he had not actually kept these commandments as God intended he should, Jesus merely brought to mind the young man's debilitating love of possessions: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (v. 21).

The introduction to the parable of the good Samaritan is along the same lines. An expert on the law tried to test Jesus by asking the same question posed by the rich young ruler: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25).

Jesus pointed him to the law: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (v. 27). The parable that followed was given to show who one's neighbor is and what it means to love him.

The most striking of Jesus' words setting out the two paths are those that come at the end of his last great sermon before the crucifixion, the sermon preached on the Mount of Olives:

[Jesus said,] "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I needed clothes and you clothed

me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They will also answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Matthew 25:31-46

I do not want anyone to think that I am substituting good works for faith as a means of salvation. I am not. If good works are even added to faith —not to mention being substituted for faith—as a grounds of salvation, this becomes a false gospel and deserves the anathema Paul pronounces on such error (Gal. 1:8-9). Salvation is achieved by Christ for all who are to be saved, and it becomes theirs by simple faith in him and his work. But we must not mock God either! It is an equal error, as Paul also shows, to think that one can be saved by faith and then continue down the same path he or she has been treading, doing no good works

at all. A person doing that is not saved, regardless or his or her profession.

Here is the wonder of the Christian gospel. On the one hand, it is utterly by grace received through faith—and even that faith is of grace (cf. Eph. 2:8). No one who is saved can possibly boast of anything. We are saved on the sole grounds of Jesus' death in our place. But, at the same time and on the other hand, those who are saved by grace through faith are placed on a path of righteousness where they do indeed perform such good works as the world about them cannot even begin to dream.

That is why Jesus could say, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the
Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.

5:20). "Righteousness" in this verse means "good deeds." So the teaching is that the people of God will—if they truly are the people of God—do good works surpassing even the best of the righteous (but unsaved) people of Christ's day.

Getting on the Right Path

What can you do if you are on the wrong path? How do you get out of the company of the wicked—who are rejecting the truth, pursuing evil, and thereby treasuring up wrath against the day of God's judgment—and into the company of those who are doing good deeds and who seek glory, honor, and immortality? Let me ask that twofold question again more clearly: What do you do if you are on a wrong path in order to get off the wrong path and onto a right one? Here are some specific answers:

1. *Recognize that you are on the wrong path.* Nobody is ever going to get off a wrong path and onto a right one as long as he or she entertains some hope that the present road will eventually lead to where he or she wants to go. So long as you think the way of your own self-seeking and of the rejection of the biblical truth about God is going to get you to happiness or fulfillment or salvation in the life to come (or whatever), you are never going to take even the first small step toward being saved. You must begin by recognizing that you are on the wrong path and that the end of that path is destruction.

2. *Admit that the path itself will not change.* Strangely, some travelers will admit that they are on a wrong road, but rather than go back to the right one they keep hoping that the road itself will change or that they will find a fork they can take that will get them to their proper destination. That will not happen in the physical world—nor in the spiritual! The path of self-seeking will always take you further from God and happiness. It is the downward path of Romans 1. It ends in the wrath of Romans 2.

3. *Turn around and face the opposite direction.* This is a way of speaking about what the Bible calls repentance or conversion. "Repentance" means to have a change of mind, to think differently and act differently as a result. "Conversion" literally means to turn around. You need to reject the way you are going and choose a different path entirely.

4. *Commit yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in his death on your behalf.* This is the fullest meaning of faith, which does not stop merely with an intellectual assent to certain truths about God or Jesus but involves a commitment to Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior. You must be able to say, as Thomas did when Jesus appeared to him a week after his resurrection, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

5. *Get on with following Jesus and obeying his commands.* When you are wandering down the path of your own self-seeking and finally begin to realize what you are doing, you sense that you are hopelessly far from the true path—and in a sense you are. As long as you continue as you are going you will always be far from it. God seems infinitely removed. The return to God seems hopeless. But when you stop and turn around, beginning to seek God rather than your own will and pleasure, you will find (much to your surprise) that Jesus is not far away at all. In fact, you find him right there beside you. It was because he was with you and was calling you that you even turned around. That is why in the Bible repentance and faith always go together, so closely together that it is often impossible to say which comes first and which second. To believe on Jesus is to turn from sin—and *vice versa.*

And there is something else, too.

In the same instant you turn from sin and believe on Jesus, you find that you are already on the right road. You do not have to seek it, because the first step on that road *is* believing on Jesus. It is being where he is. He starts with you at that precise point. Therefore, as you step forward you find the darkness dispel, the light break through, and a glimpse of

glory, honor, immortality, and eternal life rise up before you as your goal.

Chapter 27.
Not Hearers Only, But Doers

Romans 2:12-15

I mentioned previously that every preacher who spends time trying to answer questions people have about Christianity has heard the question about the heathen over and over again. "What about the poor heathen in a far-off jungle who has never heard about Jesus Christ? Will God condemn him for failing to believe on a person about whom he has not even heard?"

I have answered that question in various ways over the years. One of the answers I have sometimes given, particularly to those who are not yet Christians, is that if someday we get to heaven and discover that a number or even all of these untaught natives have arrived in heaven despite our failure to tell them about Jesus, all we will be able to do is praise God for his great mercy and unfathomable ways. We will be happy! But if, on the contrary, we get to heaven and discover that not one of the untaught heathen is there, all of them having been condemned for failing to do what they knew they should do (on the basis of the *natural* revelation), we will still praise God for his mercy (to those to whom it was extended) and acknowledge his justice in the heathens' case, since the Judge of all the earth always *does* do right (cf. Gen. 18:25).

However, when I come to Romans 2:12, as we do now, I am reproved for this answer. For the text does not suggest that the heathen may somehow get to heaven in spite of their ignorance of the gospel, but rather that they will be condemned like the others. Not for failing to believe on Jesus, of whom they have not heard, of course! But for

failing to do what they knew they should do, even apart from God's *special* revelation.

Verse 12 of our text supports this view, using the powerful word *perish.* "All who sin apart from the law will perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law."

Principles of Judgment

It can hardly be otherwise, of course, given the nature of man and the principles of God's judgment spelled out in this important second chapter of Romans. It is true that after reading verses 7 and 10 we might have some excuse for thinking that God may save some persons apart from the gospel, since those verses describe the hypothetical case of those who do good by God's standards. "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. [There will be] glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." This might suggest that there are some untaught persons who, in spite of their ignorance of the gospel, nevertheless do good, strive for immortality, and therefore will be saved. But the fact that this is an entirely hypothetical case is proved by verse 12. If anyone actually could persist in doing good, there would be the reward of eternal life with God. But no one does! Therefore, "all who sin apart from the law will also perish."

I mentioned the principles of God's judgment as a reason why no one will be saved without Christ. Based on Romans 2, it is worth reviewing them at this point.

1. *God's judgment is according to truth* (v. 2). Human judgment tries to live up to this standard.

Witnesses in our courts are required to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But obviously human judgment is at best according to partial truth, and it is often misled entirely when witnesses inadvertently misrepresent the facts or lie about them. God's judgment is infinitely superior to human judgment at this point. It is according to

full knowledge and perfect truth, because all secrets are known and all hearts are open to God. And no one will be able to lie in God's court.

2. *God's judgment is proportionate to human sins* (v. 5). This is why Paul speaks of sinners as "storing up wrath" against the day of God's wrath. Those who sin much will be punished much. Those who sin less will be judged accordingly.

3. *God's judgment is according to righteousness* (v. 5). Paul points to "his righteous judgment." There will be nothing wrong about it. It will be according to the highest possible standard and a faultless moral code.

4. *God's judgment is impartial* (v. 11). In human courts we often find the accused hoping to receive preferential treatment for one reason or another, and judges sometimes comply. Not so with God. At the final judgment all will be judged according to the same impartial standards and procedures, for, as Paul writes, "God does not show favoritism."

5. *God's judgment is according to people's deeds* (vv. 6-10, 12-15). Considering the number of verses dealing with this principle, this must have been the most important point of all according to Paul's way of thinking. Indeed, it is found throughout Romans 2, even in verses that seem to be making another point. Take verse 1, as an example. Paul is writing of persons who try to excuse their wrongdoing by saying that they have a firmer sense of what is right and wrong than other people. Paul's reply is that these persons are nevertheless guilty, because they "do the same things." That is, they are judged on the basis of their actual deeds. That phrase—"do the same things"—is also implied in verse 2 and repeated in verse 3. Finally, in verse 6, Paul says, "God 'will give to each person according to what he has done.' " It is not what we know or even what we say we do that matters. It is how we actually perform.

Sinners *Under* the Law

How hard it is for our perverted sense of being righteous in God's sight to die! As we read these verses we can discern at once what Paul was dealing with and how he is replying. I said earlier, when we began to study Romans 2, that in my judgment Paul is dealing chiefly with the virtuous pagan in the first half of the chapter (vv. 1-16) and with the Jew in the second half (vv. 17-29). But, although this is generally true, he nevertheless is also probably thinking of the Jew in this section. Paul can undoubtedly visualize the Jew's response. He has spoken of those who are "under," or exposed, to the law as perishing. But the Jew would not want to accept this. According to Jewish teaching, salvation was by the law. The pious Jew spent long hours meditating on the law and could always be found in the synagogue attending to its reading and exposition. I suppose Paul could almost hear the Jew gearing up to rattle off his accomplishments.

"I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector."—"I fast twice a week."—"I give a tenth of all I get" (cf. Luke 18:12).

"All these I have kept since I was a boy" (cf. Luke 18:21).

As a matter of fact, Paul had thought like this himself before he met Christ: "... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:5-6).

Later, Paul is going to deal with the religious person's false hopes more directly, but here he focuses on such people's actual performance. "I know you know the law," Paul is acknowledging. "But do you keep it?" He reminds them that "it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (v. 13).

Not hearers only, but doers! That is the point of this passage, and it is the point at which each of us falls down. At the time of the release of the Tower Report on the investigation of arms sales to Iran, the

newspapers carried a headline in which President Ronald Reagan was quoted as admitting, "Everyone fell short." That is it exactly—except that in the matter of our standing before God, the outcome is of far greater importance. Since we are condemned by the law, all of us having failed to live up to its standards, we must seek salvation in another way entirely.

Sinners *Apart From* the Law

There is another problem here: the problem of Gentiles (whom Paul had chiefly in mind) who would excuse themselves on the grounds that, unlike the Jews, they had not been given the law. They would agree with the justice of God in the Jews' condemnation. God had told the Jews how to live, and they had not done it. Indeed, they were even hypocritical about it, which is what Paul seems to bring out in the latter half of the chapter (vv. 17-24). The Jews had sinned *under* the law. But the Gentiles did not have the law of God. How, then, could they be condemned by it? In fact, how could they even be accused of sinning? Yet Paul wrote, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from law" (v. 12a). How can there be sin *apart from* a divine law code or revelation?

Paul's answer is in verses 14 and 15. It has two parts. First, the Gentiles, even though they do not possess the law of God given to the Jewish people, nevertheless have a law "written on their hearts." Second, they also possess "consciences" that tell them they ought to obey this law and condemn them when they do not.

This is a very important point, for it introduces for the first time in Paul's letter what the older theologians called "the moral law" or "the law of nature." Earlier we dealt with "natural revelation," which means the revelation that God has given of himself in creation. (See chapter 15 of this volume.) It involves his "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20); that is, confirms that there is a Supreme Being. But that is not what is involved here. In the earlier case, the natural revelation was seen to be sufficient to condemn all men and women, because on its basis they are obliged to seek out, thank, and worship the true God,

which they do not do. But this goes beyond the natural revelation in that it involves a moral code or order that, Paul says, is possessed by all people. They may not have the revealed law of God. But they have something like it. They have "a law for themselves," which condemns them.

No person has talked about this moral law more effectively in recent years than the late
Cambridge professor C. S. Lewis. It is the initial argument in his classic defense of the faith, *Mere Christianity.* Lewis begins with the observation that when people argue with one another, an angry person almost always appeals to some basic standard of behavior that the other person is assumed to recognize: "They say things like this: 'How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?'—'That's my seat, I was there first'—'Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm'—'Why should you shove in first?'—'Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine'—'Come on, you promised.' People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups."

What interested Lewis about these remarks is that the people making them are not merely saying that the other person's behavior just does not happen to suit them, but rather that the behavior of the other person is wrong:

The man who makes [these remarks]... is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies, "To hell with your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took the seat first should not keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given the bit of orange, or that something has turned up which lets him off keeping his promise. It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality or whatever you

like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not *quarrel* in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and

Wrong are, just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.

Lewis had a marvelously fresh gift for stating deep things simply. But it cannot escape us that this is precisely what Paul is saying in Romans 2:14-15, in reference to the Gentiles, though in more theological terms. It is true that Gentiles did not have the Jews' law. But they had a law within, a law that did not merely say that some kinds of behavior seem to work better than others or produce better responses from other people, but, rather, went far beyond that either to accuse or excuse them of wrongdoing.

Witnesses for the Prosecution

There are three important witnesses against the natural man in these verses. We must see what they are.

1. *The law of nature.* Lewis points out that today the law (or laws) of nature usually refers to physical phenomena like gravity, the bonding of elements, combustion, or nuclear energy. But, when the ancient theologians used this term, it meant, as it does here, "the law of *human* nature." The law of human nature is like natural physical law in that it comes from without and is meant to govern the way things operate or function. But there is this difference: In the physical realm an object has no choice as to whether or not it will observe the physical law. Those laws always operate. But in the human or moral realm people do have a choice, and the law is universally violated.

I know that many people object to belief in a universal moral law, pointing to the fact that some (the insane, for example) do not seem to

be aware of it or to the fact that moral standards vary among different races or cultures. But those objections are not valid. It is true that there are people who do not seem to be aware of moral standards, and the insane are among them. But the very fact that we call such persons "insane" shows that *we* nevertheless recognize and want to adhere to the standards, regardless of what the problem may be in that individual's case. If an insane man commits a crime, we usually excuse him; but we do not excuse others. The problem is the person, not the standard. Again, although there are obvious differences in the way various races and cultures look at morals, there is nevertheless far more agreement than we might think at first. Regardless of the culture, there is (with few exceptions) a general regard for life, honor, bravery, selflessness, and such things. And the law codes and moral treatises of the ancients are remarkably like our own.

Regardless of what people say or even how they act, the real proof of the moral law is in people's objection when they perceive themselves to be mistreated. If they speak of "unfair treatment," as all people do at one time or another, "have they not let the cat out of the bag and shown that, whatever they say, they really know the Law of Nature just like anyone else?" as Lewis argues.

2. *Conscience.* The second accuser in these verses is the conscience, which Paul introduces as "also bearing witness" (v. 15). Some have confused the law of nature and the conscience, but they are two very different concepts. The first is an objective standard of which all are aware; it involves knowledge, knowledge of the right. The conscience is the part of our being that tells us we ought to do the right thing personally. Robert Haldane says, "Knowledge shows what is right; the conscience approves of it and condemns the contrary."

3. *The Memory.* The third of the prosecuting witnesses in man is something we have not touched on yet, but which is introduced in the very last phrase we are studying: "their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (v. 15). It is the memory. Why is the memory so important? Obviously because it is something within

ourselves that can (and will) condemn us, even without an external, judging word from God.

What a picture we have here! Three accusers, combining their witness to prove that even the person without the law will perish!

Donald Grey Barnhouse was known for his vivid and often very original illustrations, and at this point in his treatment of Romans he refers to the famous Revolutionary War painting "The Spirit of '76." It shows a drummer, a standard-bearer, and a fifer marching briskly down the road. Barnhouse says that our conduct (measured by the moral law), our conscience, and our memory are like those figures:

Your conduct beats the drum that declares by your resounding good works that you know there is a divine law. Your conscience waves the flag that reminds you that often you have trampled your principles in the dust as you rushed past on your way to complete the desires of your own will. And the fife of your memory shrieks its refrain to remind you that you have sinned. The excuses and accusations of your thought run like shrill arpeggios in the counterpoint of your guilt. And the trio, conduct, conscience and mind, are all in step, in a perfect unison of condemnation because you have followed the road of your own will, refusing the road that forks at the cross of Jesus Christ that will lead you, if you follow it, even into eternal life.

Shall Not Perish

That is the point to which we should be led, of course. We should be led away from attempts to justify ourselves by our works, as the Jews did, or excuse ourselves as people who do not know what we should do, as the Gentiles did. Instead we should turn to Christ, where alone salvation may be found.

At the beginning of this study I spent some time talking about Romans 2:12, which says, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law." I made the point that we must never think any person will ever be saved in any way other than by faith in Jesus Christ. Apart

from him they will "perish." But whenever we see that word *perish,* with all its proper force and terror, we must also think of probably the best-known verse in the Bible, John 3:16, in which Jesus uses that word but says that it need not be our end: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:16 speaks of two destinies: eternal life and perishing, the very ends Paul speaks about in Romans 2 (vv. 7, 12). From birth we are all headed toward the second end, destined to perish miserably, without God and without hope (cf. Eph. 2:12). But Jesus died to make another and entirely different destiny possible. It is the way of atonement, with Jesus dying in our place, taking our punishment for sin upon himself. This is a wonderful end. It is, as Lewis says, "a thing of unspeakable comfort." Still, it does not begin with comfort. It begins with the knowledge of sin, so that we might turn from sin to faith in Jesus.

Chapter 28.
All Hearts Open, All Desires Known

Romans 2:16

I am not very attracted to liturgical prayers because, although liturgical language is often quite beautiful (like that of Shakespeare's plays), the mere repetition of prayers tends, in my opinion, toward a love of language for its own sake and not meaning. There are exceptions, of course, and sometimes a particular phrase sticks in mind as expressing a great truth admirably.

I think of one such expression as we come to Romans 2:16: "This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares." The main idea is the uncovering of human secrets by God at the final judgment, and the liturgical expression of that truth, which I love, is from the opening collect of the Anglican Order for the Administration of Holy Communion. It begins, "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and

from whom no secrets are hid...." I think that is a powerful expression—and helpful if it is used rightly. It reminds us that in a world ordered by an omniscient God there are, in the final analysis, *no secrets.* We may have secrets here, hiding from others what we are or do. But there will be no secrets on the day when all secrets will be brought to light before God.

The All-Knowing God

God knows all things even now, of course. God spoke of the Jewish people to Isaiah, saying, "For I know their works and their thoughts" (Isa. 66:18 KJV). King David wrote of himself:

> *O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.*
> *You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*
> *You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*
> *Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.*

Psalm 139:1-4

The author of Hebrews declared, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13).

This is one reason why unregenerate people repress their knowledge of God, as Romans 1:18-20 declares they do. We looked at this when we were studying those verses. If God knows all things, as he must if he is God, he knows us not as we wish to project ourselves before others but as we really are, and none of us can stand the thought of such perfect and penetrating knowledge.

I pointed out in that earlier study that this is one of the characteristics of human nature perceived by the existentialist philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre. In his analysis of man, Sartre rooted man's uniqueness in his being a subject, who observes, rather than an object, which is observed. A subject observes and acts. An object is observed and acted

upon. The former pleases us. The latter is disturbing. In one of his works, Sartre imagines himself as a man who is standing in a hallway, looking through a keyhole at another person. As long as he is the observer and the other person is the object observed, Sartre is content. He is in control. But suddenly he hears footsteps in the hall, turns around, and realizes that someone has been looking at him as he has looked through the keyhole. Now he is no longer content. He is no longer in control, and he is overcome with feelings of shame, fear, guilt, and embarrassment. According to Sartre, to be fully human, man must be the ultimate subject rather than an object.

But what about God? How can one escape being an object before him, since God sees us always? Sartre's solution was to banish God from his own private universe, to become an atheist.

In a series of essays called *The Words,* Sartre tells how he came to this point. He was a child at the time. He had been raised a Catholic, and as one of his assignments in the Catholic school he attended he had written a paper on the Passion of Christ. When the awards were presented for these papers, Sartre was given only a silver medal rather than the gold. He resented it and blamed God. Sartre wrote, "This disappointment drove me into impiety.... For several years more, I maintained public relations with the Almighty. But privately, I ceased to associate with him."

Then he tells how, during these years, there was a time when he felt that God existed: "I had been playing with matches and burned a small rug. I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt his gaze inside my head and on my hands. I whirled about in the bathroom, horribly visible, a live target. Indignation saved me. I flew into a rage against so crude an indiscretion, I blasphemed, I muttered like my grandfather: 'God damn it, God damn it, God damn it.' He never looked at me again."

That story alone explains the life and philosophy of Sartre. Yet it is sad and tragic. Sad, because it is mistaken. Sartre says, "He [God] never looked at me again." But in reality God never ceased to look at Sartre.

God looks on all things and sees them perfectly. Actually, it was Sartre who had ceased to look at God. Tragic, because by turning his back on God, Sartre turned from the one being in the universe who could have helped him.

I said earlier that Sartre's solution to the problem of being beneath the gaze of God and of being overcome by natural feelings of shame, fear, guilt, and embarrassment was to banish God from his universe—to become an atheist. But it does not require a philosophical genius to realize that this is only whistling in the dark. If there is a God, as even Sartre indirectly attests, then he cannot be so banished, certainly not by human beings. Moreover, if God is omniscient, as he must be if he is God, then not only has he seen all the evil deeds we have done and known the evil thoughts we have had. He also remembers them. And one day he will produce them for exposure and judgment.

It is what Paul speaks about when he writes of "the day when God will judge man's secrets through Jesus Christ."

Naked Before God and Man

I now take you from that day of judgment to one of the very first days of human history. It is the day when Adam and Eve stood before God in the Garden of Eden shortly after having sinned by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The story is in Genesis 3, but the theme is set in the previous chapter, before the fall, where it is said: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:25).

I have said many times in considering this story that I have no doubt that this was a literal physical nakedness. Otherwise the matter of their making fig-leaf clothes for themselves, which we are told about later, has no meaning. But it was a psychological nakedness, too. Adam and Eve were not ashamed in their nakedness before they sinned. It was only after they had sinned that they were conscious of it.

Why were they unashamed before the fall? The answer is obvious. Nakedness has to do with exposure, not only with external, physical exposure but, more importantly, with internal exposure. They were not ashamed in their nakedness before the fall because they had nothing to be ashamed about.

1. *They were unashamed before God.* Adam and Eve had done nothing that would have been any cause for shame. They were without sin at the time, and their relationship to God was one of utter openness. They delighted to see God when he came to them in the garden. They conversed with him freely. We cannot do this, of course, and the reason we cannot do it is sin. Sin causes us to hide from God, as Adam and Eve later did when God came to them. Sin causes us to flee from him.

Some flee into atheism, as Sartre did.

Some flee into materialism.

Even Christians run away from God when they persist in sin.

Donald Grey Barnhouse had been preaching on a college campus and had been invited to speak in one of the women's dorms following a meeting that had been held elsewhere that evening. When he finished, one of the young women remained behind, obviously offended by his teaching. Her face was scowling. "I used to believe that stuff, but I don't believe it anymore," she said.

Barnhouse asked, "What class are you in?"

"I'm a freshman."

"What kind of a family do you come from?" The girl said that she came from a Christian family.

"Do you have a Bible?"

"Yes."

"Do you read it?"

"I used to read it," the student said, "but I don't read it anymore. I told you I no longer believe that stuff."

"Can you remember when you stopped reading it?" Barnhouse asked. The girl said that she had stopped reading it around Thanksgiving. "Tell me," said Barnhouse, "what happened in your life around November the tenth?" The girl began to cry, and it soon came out that at that time she had started to live in sin with a young man, and it was because of this that she could no longer tolerate the gaze of God when she read her Bible.

Wesley said it well: "The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible." This is because the God who confronts us in Scripture is the holy God before whom all hearts are open.

2. *They were unashamed before each other.* Before the fall, it was not only God before whom Adam and Eve were unashamed. They were also unashamed before each other, and for the same reason. They had nothing to be ashamed about. They had not lied to one another. They had not falsely accused one another, as they later did, trying to shift the blame for their sin to others. They had not harmed one another. As a result they could be completely themselves. Today no one can be completely open in a relationship. In some good relationships we come close. But still, there is a residue of ourselves that we keep hidden even from a spouse or very close friend. Why? Because we are ashamed of ourselves, and we fear that if we reveal the fault, the other will cease to love us or respect us.

3. *They were unashamed in their own eyes.* Both Adam and Eve were without shame as they looked on themselves. In those first days, Adam could look at himself and know he had nothing to hide. And Eve could look at herself and know she had nothing to hide.

What about us? Today, most of us will hardly stop our mad race through life long enough even to take a brief glance at who we are. Generations ago, people lived more slowly; they could reflect on who they were and

where they were going. Modern life has intensified the pace. Most of us cannot even come into a room and sit down for two minutes without feeling the need to snap on the television set or radio to fill our heads with stimulation—anything to keep from thinking. "All the news, all the time!" That is what we want. And the reason we want it is that we do not want to consider that we are naked before God and that nothing is hidden from him before whom we must give account.

Hiding from Thee

What we are and do comes out in the continuation of the Genesis story. Adam and Eve sinned, in spite of the warning God had given them concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So when God came to them in the garden they hid themselves—or at least they tried to.

Actually, they had already tried to hide, first from themselves and then from each other. They did it by trying to make clothing from fig leaves. Sometimes when people are trying to be funny they speak of prostitution as the oldest human profession, but they are wrong in this. The oldest profession is not prostitution but the clothing industry. Later, sin showed itself in sexual sins as well as in other ways. But the very first effect of sin was the opening of the eyes of Adam and Eve to perceive that they were naked, in response to which "they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Gen. 3:7). In other words, as sinners they found their psychological exposure intolerable and tried to cover up. At first they used leaves. Later, when God appeared to question them, they used evasions and excuses and tried to put the blame on God.

I have sometimes spoken of these leaves as good works and of the attempt to be covered by them as "fig-leaf righteousness." It was a way of saying, "We are all right. We are not sinners. We are good people." Well, as long as it was just the two of them, they got by, since they were both sinners. But the fig leaves were inadequate when they finally stood before God, just as our good works will be useless at the judgment.

I do not know what happened to those fig leaves when God finally appeared to Adam and Eve and called them to stand before him. Perhaps they fell off. But whether or not they did, they might as well have, for nothing could have hidden from God what they were or had done. So it will be in *our* judgment. We commit our sins in secret. We present a false face to the public. We declare that God does not exist. We brand ourselves atheists. We think we are safe. But we do not need reporters hiding in the bushes to observe what we are doing and report it in the *National Enquirer.* We do not need a talk-show host to reveal our cover-up transactions. God knows. God remembers. And one day he "will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ." What a dreadful last scene to human history!

The Psalmist said, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins [and he does], O LORD, who could stand?" (Ps. 130:3).

Naked—Yet Clothed by God

I come to the climax of the story of Adam and Eve's sin, and it is chiefly for this that I tell it. God told Adam and Eve that the punishment for their eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would be death. But when he confronted them in their sin and exposed it, the death he had promised fell not on them but on a substitute. And here is a truly thrilling point: *It was with the skin of the substitute that they were clothed.*

The Bible tells it tersely, saying, "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). The text does not indicate what animals God killed in order to get the skins with which he clothed Adam and Eve, but in view of the development of this idea later in the Bible, I tend to think that they were lambs and that the skins were lambskins. Certainly, the incident is meant to point to Jesus Christ as the only sufficient atonement for sin, and Jesus is pictured as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Whatever they were, God must have killed animals in order to have the skins with which he clothed our first parents.

Think what this must have meant to Adam and Eve. Their first thought, when they saw the animals lying dead in front of them, must have been, "So this is what death is!" They must have regarded the scene with horror. God had told them, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). But if they had not witnessed death before this, which we are to suppose they had not, they probably did not take this threat seriously. Now suddenly death was before them, and they must have sensed for the very first time how serious it is to disobey God. In that instant it must have dawned on them that if death is the result of sin, then sin is far worse than anything they could possibly have imagined. Moreover, *they* were sinners, and their sin was damnable.

But there is something else that must have gripped them in that instant, and that was a deep and growing wonder at God's mercy. God had told them that their sin would be punished by death. And it was! But wonder of wonders, it was not themselves who died but the animals. They had broken God's law. God had every right to take their lives in forfeit of his broken commandment. But instead, he showed that there could be a substitution. An innocent could die for them.

And there was another marvel, too. They were exposed as sinners. All the secrets they had were revealed. But although their sins were exposed—their nakedness was a symbol of it—they did not have to remain naked. Rather, God clothed them with the skins of the slain animals. So they were both exposed and covered at the same time.

This is what must be done for us. We cannot escape from our guilt. The guilt is there and is well documented. We can try to deny it, but everything in our lives, culture, and psychological makeup will refute the denial. We show our guilt by doors and blinds and shower curtains and the clothing industry—as well as by our calculated attempts to hide from one another. These patterns testify to the truthfulness of the Word of God. But the gospel tells us that God deals with this guilt. He does not just deny, forgive, or forget it. He deals with it in Jesus Christ.

Christ died for sin; the penalty of sin has been paid. Now God clothes those who have believed in Christ with Christ's righteousness:

> Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
> My beauty are, my glorious dress; 'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head.

Whoever you are, the day is coming when you will stand before the judgment bar of God, and God will judge even the deepest secrets of your heart. How will you manage in that day? You can appear before God in only one of two ways. Either you will stand before him in the righteousness of Christ, your sin atoned for by his death, or you will stand in the horror of your own spiritual and moral nakedness. The Bible speaks of people who will be like that. It describes their terror. "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" (Rev. 6:15-17).

Do not wait until the day when God will expose and judge all secrets. Flee to Christ for his righteousness today.

Chapter 29.
The Second Excuse: Religion

Romans 2:17-24

It should be evident from study of the earlier portions of Romans that nearly everything that has been said thus far applies to all men and women. That is, it applies to ourselves—apart from the supernatural work of God in us through the Holy Spirit. Regardless of our achievements, our vaunted moral standards or our outward position in life, we are all in exactly the same situation as the hedonistic pagan described in Romans 1. We have suppressed the knowledge of God

disclosed to us in nature and have therefore launched ourselves along the path of moral and spiritual decline that the chapter describes. The propensity to condemn others for what we ourselves do, which is unfolded in Romans 2, also describes us.

But we are great at making distinctions, particularly when these are to our advantage, and it is to another of these self-serving "excuses" that we now come. We have already seen one such distinction, used by the moralist, who admits that there are indeed pagans like those portrayed in Romans 1 but who denies that he or she is like them—because the person knows better and has "standards." (See my chapter 13.) The new distinction, the one that enters in here, is made by individuals who consider themselves to be religious.

In Paul's day such a person was the Jew, which is how Paul begins the section: "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew...." Today the person who fits this category could be an ardent Fundamentalist, any churchgoing Protestant (regardless of denomination), a devout Catholic, or some other variety of "religious" individual.

Let's imagine what this religious person might be thinking. He or she has been listening to Paul describe the pagan morality of the day and has been quick to join Paul in condemning it. "I am glad that you have spoken as you have," this person might tell Paul, "because things really are in a terrible state today. The divorce rate is up. Our political leaders lie to us. Nobody wants to work. The schools are breaking down. Crime, venereal disease, prostitution, gambling and other vices are increasing. Moreover, if God is a God of justice and truth, as we suppose he must be, he will certainly judge all these wicked people severely. So preach to them. The drug dealers, the crime lords, the politicians—all, no doubt, will profit from your gospel.

"But leave me out of it! I am a very religious person, and my religious commitments exempt me from your blanket condemnations. I have

been a churchgoing person all my life. I have been baptized and confirmed. I go to communion. I give to the church's support."

Paul replies that these are genuinely good things and not to be ignored. "But you still need the gospel," he says.

"Why?"

"Because God is not interested in outward things alone—things like church membership, the sacraments, stewardship—but rather in what is within."

God says, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7b).

A Catalogue of Advantages

I have put this argument in simple contemporary language, but when we turn to Romans 2:17-20 we find the Jew (the "religious person" of Paul's day) to be making eight important claims. Four are about the Jews' special spiritual advantages. Four are about their religious privileges. The claims having to do with the Jews' spiritual advantages are:

1. God has given us his law.
2. He has entered into a special relationship with us.
3. Because we have been given his law, we know his will, and
4. We approve only the most excellent of human moral standards.

The claims having to do with their privileges are:

1. To be a guide for the blind,
2. To be a light for those who are in the dark,
3. To be an instructor for the foolish, and

4. To be a teacher of infants.

To evaluate these claims properly, we must begin by seeing that *so far as they go*, each is absolutely true. Many of our contemporaries would regard such claims as mere spiritual arrogance or prejudice, believing that no religion has any special claim to truth. But no Christian can think like this, nor can any true Jew. The Jew in Paul's day boasted of having received a unique and special revelation from God: first from the hands of Moses on Mount Sinai and then by a long succession of writings from selected generals, kings, chroniclers, and prophets. And he was correct in this boast! In fact, Christians as well as Jews receive the writings of the Old Testament as the very words of God, not as mere human inventions. The apostle Peter wrote, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

In the same way, it is also absolutely true that God had entered into a special relationship with the Jews. He had begun with Abraham, and from Abraham's days onward Jews had enjoyed the advantages of a covenant relationship.

Jesus taught this in his conversation with the Samaritan woman whom he met at Jacob's well near Sychar (John 4:1-26). When he touched upon her sin, she tried to get him into a theological discussion—just like many people today do when so confronted. They try to escape dealing with the evil in their lives. This woman asked a question about the proper place for worship— undoubtedly often discussed in the towns of Samaria in her day. Was it Jerusalem, as the Jews obviously claimed? Or was it upon Mount Gerazim, as the Samaritans believed? (vv. 19-20).

Jesus answered the woman in two ways. First, he opened her eyes to a new era of worship, which he was bringing in, a time in which worship would be neither in Jerusalem exclusively nor in Samaria. Rather, he said, "... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... they are the kind of

worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (vv. 23-24).

Second, Jesus dealt with the specific question she raised. This has forever settled the matters both of the authority of the Old Testament and of the priority of Jews in spiritual matters. Jesus said, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews" (v. 22). It follows from this that until the inauguration of the church age at Pentecost, although salvation was available for Gentiles, the way was by the gate of Judaism only.

Again, the Jew addressed by Paul in our text was right in claiming that because he possessed a true revelation from God in what we call the Old Testament, he really did know God's will. Or at least he had the proper foundation for knowing it. In Romans 2:18 "will" is not referring to the secret or hidden counsels of God—for an obvious reason: the hidden counsels of God are indeed hidden. Rather, it refers to the revelation in Scripture of what, as Haldane put it, "is agreeable to him, what he requires them to do, what he commands, what he prohibits, what he approves, and what he rewards." We have an example of what this means in the three specific commandments that Paul cites in verses 21 and 22.

Finally, the Jew was right in his claim that because he was instructed by the law he had a valid basis for approving what was excellent or superior in human moral standards. In other words, he could evaluate any lesser standards because he possessed an absolute rule or yardstick by which to measure them.

Out of these four basic spiritual advantages grew an equally impressive set of privileges, couched here in somewhat metaphorical language. The Jew saw himself as being "a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants"—all because he had "the embodiment of knowledge and truth" in the Scriptures (vv. 19-20). And so he did! So he was! The knowledge of the true God and the way of this true God were indeed a light in the dark labyrinth of pagan superstition and culture.

The Eighth Commandment

Alas, knowledge of God and of the way of this true God was not enough! This is because, as we have already seen, God judges according to truth and not according to appearances, according to what men and women actually do and not according to their mere professions.

At this point Paul brings forth three examples of that "superior" way of the Jew, which came as a result of his possessing the revealed law of God: the eighth of the Ten Commandments, the seventh of the Ten Commandments, and a statement embracing the first two of the Ten Commandments. The eighth commandment said, "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15). This was part of the Jewish instruction properly passed to others. But, Paul asks, did the Jew himself steal? The seventh commandment said, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14). But did the Jew commit adultery? The first and second commandments declared: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:3-6). But did the Jew break these two commandments?

So far I have written about Romans 2:17-24 as if it is dealing with Jews almost exclusively. But here we must break away from that more limited view and get back to what I said at the beginning, namely, that these verses speak to all kinds of "religious" people: Fundamentalists, churchgoing Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, whatever. It is a charge, as one commentator puts it, "against the orthodox."

So I ask, "We who preach against stealing, do we steal?"

The idea that one should not steal is a generally accepted standard of human behavior, but it is just as generally broken. We should not think

that we have kept this commandment just because we have not forced our way into another person's home and walked off with his possessions. We steal from God when we fail to worship him as we ought or when we set our own concerns ahead of his. We steal from an employer when we do not give the best work of which we are capable or when we overextend our coffee breaks or leave work early. We steal if we waste company products or use company time for personal matters. We steal if we sell something for more than it is worth. We steal from our employees if the work environment for which we are responsible harms their health, or if we do not pay them enough to guarantee a healthy, adequate standard of living. We steal when we borrow something and do not return it. We steal from ourselves when we waste our talents, time, or money.

The Seventh Commandment

After citing the eighth of the Ten Commandments, Paul moves backward to the seventh and asks: "You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"

What are we to answer to this question, particularly if we live in the United States of America where adultery, fornication, and a variety of forms of sexual experimentation are not only excused, but even encouraged and applauded? What are we to answer in view of the revelation of sexual sins in the lives of prominent national figures, both secular and religious? What are we to say in view of Jesus' teaching that the seventh commandment has to do with the thoughts of our minds and the intents of our hearts and not only with external actions. According to Jesus' teaching, lust is the equivalent of adultery, just as hate is the equivalent of murder (Matt. 5:2728; cf. vv. 21-22). The biblical standard is purity before marriage and fidelity afterward.

There is hardly an area of our cultural life so in opposition to God's standards. The media use the lure of sex to push materialism and glamorize the pursuit of pleasure. Television fills our living rooms with sex-filled advertisements, and its programs are increasingly explicit in portraying immoral sexual relationships and practices. Movies are

worse. Even the most respectable areas of our cities frequently feature X-rated films.

At one time people would defend high sexual standards, even though they often did something quite different on the side. But today we do not even hold to the morality. "If it feels good, do it!" That is the cry of our age and the practice of the great majority.

The First and Second Commandments

The third of Paul's examples of preaching one thing but doing another is a reference to the first and second commandments: "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"

It is not as easy to understand this question as it is to understand the first two. There are several problems. First, the second half of the sentence does not match the first in the same way the parts of the first two questions match. When Paul says, "You who preach against stealing, do you steal?" he is charging the religious person with doing exactly what that person says others should not do. In other words, the religious person says, "Do not steal," yet he does steal. So also with the second example. The religious person says, "Do not commit adultery," but he commits adultery himself. In the case of this third example, the parts do not match. The prohibition is: "Do not worship idols." But Paul's accusation is not idolatry, which we might expect, but rather sacrilege or robbery of the heathen temples.

The second problem is equally if not more puzzling. So far as we know, the Jews did not "rob temples." Does this mean, then, merely that they robbed God of the honor properly due to him? Does it refer to the trafficking in offerings conducted in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem, which Jesus condemned? Does it refer to Jews possessing (perhaps as art objects) items that had been taken from heathen temples by Gentile armies and later sold? Does it refer to actual temple spoilage? It is hard to say what this means, although there are arguments in favor of each of these views.

What we can say is that, regardless of the particular way the ancient Jew may have broken the first and second of the Ten Commandments (which we may or may not understand), we certainly understand how *we* have broken them—even the most religious among us.

The first commandment is a demand for our exclusive and zealous worship of the true God: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). To worship any god but the biblical God is to break this commandment. But we need not worship a clearly defined "god" to break this commandment—Zeus, Minerva, Buddha, Allah, or one of the countless modern idols. We break it whenever we give some person or some object or some worldly aspiration the first place in our lives, a place that belongs to God alone. Often today the substitute god is ourselves or our image of ourselves. It can be such things as success, fame, material affluence, or power over others. To keep this commandment would be, as John R. W. Stott says, "to see all things from his [God's] point of view and do nothing without reference to him; to make his will our guide and his glory our goal; to put him first in thought, word and deed; in business and leisure; in friendships and career; in the use of our money, time and talents; at work and at home."

Now consider the second commandment, which says: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:4-6). If the first commandment deals with the *object* of our worship, forbidding the worship of any false God, this commandment deals with the *manner* of our worship, forbidding us to worship even the true God unworthily.

This means that we should take the utmost care to discover what God is truly like and thus increasingly worship him as the only great, transcendent, spiritual, and inscrutable God he is. But we do not do this. Instead, as Paul argued at the beginning of his discussion, we suppress

the knowledge of God and find that our foolish hearts are darkened (Rom. 1:18, 21).

When Paul comes to the end of this paragraph, which describes the true state of the orthodox, or "religious," person, he quotes the Old Testament to show that "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (v. 24; cf. Isa. 52:5; Ezek. 36:22). This is always the case when ostensibly devout persons violate the very standards they proclaim. It is a terrible thing!

But there is something even more terrible, and that is for these same persons to continue nevertheless along this wrong path, supposing that they are on the best of standings with God— just because they are religious—when actually they are, like the utter pagans around them, on a swift journey to destruction. William Barclay begins his discussion of these verses with the words: "To a Jew a passage like this must have come as a shattering experience." He is right, of course. But it is not only for the Jew that a passage like this is or should be shattering. It should be shattering to us all, particularly if we find ourselves thinking that our case is somehow different from that of other persons—because of our religious leanings.

If you have been trusting in your baptism, If you have been trusting in your confirmation, If you have been trusting in your church membership, or your knowledge of the Bible or doctrine, or in your generous stewardship, If you have been trusting in your Christian upbringing, If you have been trusting in *anything* other than Jesus Christ and his death upon the cross in your place, throw whatever it is completely out of your mind. Abandon it. Stamp upon it. Grind it down. Dust off the place where it lay.

Then turn to Jesus Christ alone, and trust him only.

Chapter 30.
Circumcision

Romans 2:25-29

When my wife and I lived in Basel, Switzerland, we became acquainted with the annual Swiss celebration known as Faschnacht, which is the equivalent of the Mardi Gras—"Fat Tuesday." This term refers to the time of indulgence immediately preceding Lent (which always begins on a Wednesday) in which people do things they expect to have to give up for the solemn days leading up to Good Friday. Basel is a Protestant city, so its citizens hold Faschnacht during the first week of Lent—in bold defiance of Catholic custom. But otherwise their week of riotous abandon is precisely the same as found elsewhere. The Swiss have many jokes about it. One of the standard jokes concerns the number of illegitimate babies that will be born in Basel about nine months later.

In Switzerland the Salvation Army is evangelical, and each year it uses Faschnacht to witness to the claims of Christ. I remember from the time I was there that in the days immediately before the celebration of Faschnacht billboards appeared bearing the name of the Salvation Army, an address or phone number where one could get spiritual council, and a sentence in German that went: *Gott sieht hinter deine Maske*. It means "God sees behind your mask."

I have reflected on that many times, remembering that it is a statement of a great biblical principle, found explicitly for the first time in 1 Samuel 16:7. That text says, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Last Retreat of the Orthodox

This is what Paul is getting at in the last paragraphs of Romans 2, as he deals for the final time with the objections of those who consider themselves to be so thoroughly religious that they do not need the gospel. The issue is the Jewish sacrament of circumcision and the accompanying claim that all who have been circumcised will be saved.

Robert Haldane writes that "Paul here pursues the Jew into his last retreat." The Jew, who was the chief example in Paul's day of the thoroughly religious person, had begun his defense against Paul's gospel

by the argument that he (or she) possessed the law. As we have seen in the previous study, Paul argued that possession of the law, although undoubtedly a great privilege, is of no value if the one possessing the commands of God fails to keep them. The law says, "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15). But knowing that is no help if you do steal, for then the law condemns rather than exonerates the individual. It is the same with other commandments: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14) and "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). The Jew, along with everybody else, had broken those laws. So it was not sufficient to say, "I have the law, and therefore I do not need the gospel." On the contrary, the law is given to reveal our need of God's grace.

Still, the Jew had one last card to play, one final argument. He had been circumcised, and circumcision had brought him into visible outward fellowship with that body of covenant people to whom God had made salvation promises. It was like saying that circumcision (our counterpart is baptism) had made him a member of that body, and because of that membership his salvation was certain.

The Jew really did believe this—just as many people today believe they are saved merely by being members of a church! In the various commentaries I possess, the most thorough documentation of this point is by Charles Hodge, who drew it from a variety of scholars. I quote his summary here:

Rabbi Menachem in his *Commentary on the Books of Moses* (fol. 43, col. 1) says, "Our Rabbins have said that no circumcised man will see hell." In the *Jalkut Rubeni* (num. 1) it is taught, "Circumcision saves from hell." In the *Medrasch Tillim* (fol. 7, col. 2) it is said, "God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell." In the book of *Akedath Jizehak* (fol. 54, col. 2) it is taught that "Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there."

The argument is that salvation is for Jews and that what makes one a Jew is circumcision. Today, of course, even Jews are not quite certain

about what it is that makes a true Jew. The most common answer is that a Jew is a person who has descended from Abraham. Yet what about Ishmael and those who descended from him, the Arabs? Ishmael was Abraham's son, but Ishmael's descendants are not Jews, though they are of Semitic stock. To account for this, the official Jewish definition is that a Jew is a person who has a Jewish mother. By this reasoning, Isaac alone would be Jewish and Ishmael would be excluded. But what about a child born of a good Jewish mother (or even of two good Jewish parents) who converts to Christianity? Is such a person Jewish? According to the official theory, a child of a Jewish mother who converts to Christianity would be Jewish. Yet in many Jewish circles conversion to Christianity is considered grounds not only for denying that the person is Jewish but also for excluding such a one from his or her own biological family.

What is a Jew?

Paul's answer to this important question is radical. But notice: Paul does not say (since he is dealing with salvation matters) that one does not have to be a Jew to be saved, but rather that one has to be a *true* Jew which, as he points out, is not a matter of external criteria—such as possession of the law, descent from Abraham, or circumcision—but of conduct, which flows from spiritual changes within. "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code..." (vv. 28-29).

It is what we found earlier in Romans 2. God's concern is not chiefly with our knowing the truth but with our doing it (vv. 1-3). It is not a matter of our having the law but of obeying its precepts (vv. 21-23).

Let me quote William Barclay:

Jewishness, [Paul] insists, is not a matter of race at all; Jewishness has nothing to do with circumcision. Jewishness is a matter of conduct. If that is so, there is many a so-called Jew who is a pure descendent of

Abraham and who bears the mark of circumcision in his body, who is no Jew at all; and equally there is many a Gentile who never heard of Abraham and who would never dream of being circumcised, who is a Jew in the real sense of the term.... With one stroke Paul was abolishing the very basis of Jewish thought. He was shutting out from real Jewishness many and many a Jew, and he was introducing a new conception which made Jewishness a thing available to every nation, a thing as wide as the earth itself.

What Is a Sacrament?

Most of us are not personally affected by contemporary debate over the definition of a true Jew, of course. But the matter of godly conduct accomplished in us by the work of the Holy Spirit (v. 29) is our concern. And, as far as the sacraments go (our sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper, rather than circumcision), the issue is whether these reflect the necessary inward change and reality.

What is a sacrament?

Peter Lombard, who lived in the twelfth century, called a sacrament "a sign of a sacred thing." John Calvin, in a more comprehensive statement, wrote that a sacrament is "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels before the eyes of men." The important thing in each definition is that a sacrament is a "sign" of a spiritual reality rather than the reality itself.

Let me define a sacrament from a Christian point of view. There are four elements:

1. *A sacrament is a divine ordinance instituted by Christ himself.* This links the sacraments to other things that Christ also commanded us to do: for instance, to pray. But it separates it from things that we may do but are not commanded to do: to kneel when we pray or to sing hymns when we worship, to give just two examples. In this, the New Testament sacraments of baptism and

the Lord's Supper, which were commanded by Christ, are like the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision, which God himself imposed on Abraham and his descendants.

2. *A sacrament uses material elements as visible signs of God's blessing.* In baptism the sign is water. In the Lord's Supper the signs are bread, which signifies the Lord's body, and wine, which signifies his shed blood. The Old Testament sign was a cutting away of the flesh.

This is an important matter, for it sets the sacraments off from other proper but nonsacramental activities that do not use material elements as signs. Moreover, the element distinguishes the sacrament from that to which it points. For example, if you are driving along the New Jersey Turnpike and see a sign that reads "New York 30 miles," you realize that the sign is pointing to New York. The sign is not itself New York. Again, if you see a sign saying "Drink Coca-Cola," you know that the sign is not Coca-Cola. It is only pointing you in that direction. It is in this way that the sacraments point to spiritual realities. Baptism signifies our identification with Jesus Christ by faith. The Lord's Supper signifies our vital participation and union with him. The sign is secondary, outward, and visible. The reality is primary, inward, and invisible.

3. *A sacrament is a means of grace.* This does not mean that spiritual life is automatically communicated to the one who participates in the sacraments in some magical way, so that he or she is automatically saved. This is the point Paul is denying in his discussion of circumcision in our text. But this negative truth is not the same thing as saying that the sacraments have no value. Indeed, immediately after denying in Romans 2 that one is saved by circumcision, Paul goes on to speak of the "value" of circumcision in the next chapter, as we shall see. What is the value of baptism and the Lord's Supper? John Murray answers:

Baptism is a means of grace and conveys blessing, because it is the certification to us of God's grace and in the acceptance of that

certification we rely upon God's faithfulness, bear witness to his grace, and thereby strengthen faith.... In the Lord's Supper that significance is increased and cultivated, namely, communion with Christ and participation of the virtue accruing from his body and blood. The Lord's Supper represents that which is continuously being wrought. We partake of Christ's body and blood through the means of the ordinance. We thus see that the accent falls on the faithfulness of God, and the efficacy resides in the response we yield to that faithfulness.

4. *A sacrament is a seal, certification, or confirmation of the grace it signifies.* Earlier I pointed out that a sign points to something other than itself, like the sign directing a traveler to New York or encouraging him to drink Coca-Cola. But a sign frequently does something else as well: It indicates ownership. A sign saying "Joe's Restaurant," means that the restaurant belongs to Joe. A sign reading "United States Courthouse" means that the building on which it is found is the property of the federal government. In a similar way, some signs authenticate documents. A seal on a passport or on an academic transcript validates that document.

Theologians refers to sacraments as "signs and seals" of some reality: signs because they point to them, seals because they authenticate the one submitting to the sacrament.

This is what made baptism such an important sign for Martin Luther. There were times in the midst of the fearful events and enervating pressures of the Reformation when Luther, who went up and down emotionally, as forceful leaders often do, became confused about everything. In his most bleak periods he questioned the value of the Reformation; he questioned his own faith; he even questioned the value of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on his behalf. But we are told that when that happened he would frequently write on the table in front of him in chalk the Latin words *baptizatus sum*! ("I have been baptized!"). That sign would point him to spiritual reality, and he would be reassured that he really was Christ's and had been identified with him in his death and resurrection.

Being a Jew is important. In fact, in a sense every saved person must be a member of that covenant people. But only if you are a true Jew (cf. Gal. 6:16)! That is, one must be a Jew inwardly and spiritually, not necessarily by physical descent from Abraham. In the same way, circumcision is of value, but only if it points (like baptism and the Lord's Supper) to the reality of a changed heart.

Summary of Romans 2

We have now come to the end of Romans 2, and it is time to summarize Paul's teaching in that chapter. The apostle has been dealing with persons who would agree with his condemnation of the heathen (as expressed in chapter 1), but who would excuse themselves on the grounds either (1) of being very moral, that is, people who know higher standards of conduct than those possessed by the heathen; or (2) of being thoroughly religious and therefore of being saved by the possession of the revealed law of God and by participation in the sacraments.

Do you know of any people like that today? Of course, you do. You may even be one of them. Here is what the apostle Paul says to such people:

1. *Knowledge alone, even knowledge of the highest spiritual and moral principles, does not win God's approval.* On the contrary, superior knowledge actually leads to even greater condemnation—if it is not accompanied by adherence to the higher standard. Both the moral pagan and the orthodox Jew were found wanting, not because they did not have a moral code or divine revelation, but because, having that code or revelation, they nevertheless failed to live up to it. The pagan did "the same things" he condemned in others (vv. 1-3). The Jew likewise "broke the law" (vv. 21-23).
2. *Membership in a religious society, whether the covenant nation of Israel or the visible church of Christendom, does not guarantee that we have obtained God's favor.* It is not that belonging to the visible company of God's people is unimportant. It is. But

salvation is not won by any external associations if (as we have seen) God looks not on outward appearances but on the heart. Jews have been saved; they are being saved. But it is not because they are Jews! Church members are likewise being saved. But it is not because they are church members! If any of us could perfectly keep the law of God, we would be saved by keeping it. But none of us can. We have all broken it. Therefore, we can be saved only as the result of Christ's death on the cross and the application of that work to us by the Holy Spirit. This alone brings us into the true company of God's elect people and develops a life consistent with that new identity.

3. *The sacraments, either of the Old Testament or the New Testament periods, save no one.* They point to what saves, but they are not the reality themselves. Hodge observes, "According to the apostle, the true idea of a sacrament is not that it is a mystic rite, possessed of inherent efficacy or conveying grace as a mere *opus operatum*; but that it is a seal and sign, designed to confirm our faith in the validity of the covenant to which it is attached; and from its significant character to present and illustrate some great spiritual truth."

4. *God judges according to truth and performance, and by that standard every human being is condemned.* We may not like the concluding part of that sentence, but we can hardly disagree with the rightness and value of the first part. Would it be right for God to judge in any other than the highest and most righteous fashion? Could he judge in any way other than by truth? Could he admit falsehood or deception before the bar of his justice? Could he allow pretense or wishful thinking or mere intentions, rather than actual deeds, to slip by? Could he overlook sin, just because a person is a Jew? Or a church member? Or just because he or she might know better? Obviously, none of these perversions of justice can occur with God, though they are all too common in human systems. If this is true, then of themselves no human beings will be justified.

5. *If we are to be saved, it must be by the labor of Jesus Christ applied to us by the Father through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.* When David sinned and then confessed his sin in Psalm 51, even though he confessed his sin genuinely and thoroughly he did not suppose that it was the mere fact of his confession that would save him. On the contrary, he looked entirely to God. He prayed: (1) "Cleanse me with hyssop..." (v. 7). Hyssop was used to sprinkle the blood of the animals used in the Jewish sacrificial system. So this was a plea for cleansing by the blood of the atonement. And he added: (2) "Create in me a pure heart" (v. 10). As the next verse makes clear, David understood this to be something that could only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit, which is precisely the point to which Paul comes at the conclusion of the chapter.

I end with one last observation. In the final sentence of Romans 2, Paul has a pun, which is untranslatable in English but which takes us back to the identification of a true Jew, with which we began. The word *Jew* comes from the name of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob (or Israel, Gen. 32:28), and the pun is found in the fact that Judah means "praise." When Leah gave birth to
Judah she said, "This time I will praise the Lord," and the text adds, "So she named him Judah [or 'praise']" (Gen. 29:35). Similarly, when Jacob/Israel was dying, he said, using the same pun, "Judah, your brothers will praise you" (Gen. 49:8a).

This is the pun Paul uses at the end of the chapter: "Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God." He means, "True Jewishness (Judah) is from God and is spiritual. It does not come from men by outward things like circumcision."

Chapter 31.
Do Jews Have an Edge?

Romans 3:1

Every profession has its favorite stories, and the legal profession is no exception. A lawyer friend tells a story of a novice attorney defending a man accused of biting another man's ear off during a barroom brawl. A witness to the fight was on the stand, and the lawyer was cross-examining him. "Did you actually see the defendant bite this man's ear off?" the young attorney asked.

"No, sir," the witness replied.

That was the answer the attorney wanted and needed, but he made a mistake not uncommon to young lawyers. Instead of ending his cross examination when he was ahead and on a winning track, he continued to ask questions.

"What exactly did you see?" he queried.

"I saw him spit it out," said the witness.

The point is that going too far or failing to quit when you're ahead is a mistake in legal squabbling.

The Problem with Paul's Argument

It is a like charge—that he has gone too far—that the apostle Paul seems to hear an opponent raise as he comes to the end of Romans 2 and begins chapter 3. We know what Paul has been trying to prove: that all persons, Jews as well as Gentiles, are guilty of sin before God and therefore need a Savior. No one can save himself. But Paul has argued this case so forcefully that he has virtually equated the Jew, who was thought to have great religious advantages, with the Gentile, who had none. He has said, "There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism" (Rom. 2:9-11). Then, when he reaches the end of the chapter, he defines Jewishness in a way that has virtually nothing whatever to do with a person's religious or ethnic heritage: "A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision

is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code..." (v. 29).

"But doesn't that prove too much?" an opponent would be arguing. If God treats Jews and Gentiles alike, not showing favoritism, and if the only thing that makes one truly Jewish is an inward transformation by the Holy Spirit, then what advantage is there in being a Jew?

Or, to put it in other terms, what is the Old Testament all about? Why did God bother to choose Abraham and establish his descendants, the Jews, as a special covenant people if there is no advantage to being Jewish? And why did God institute circumcision? If Paul is right, these things are pointless. Or, since we know that what God does is not pointless and must have a proper purpose to it, isn't it the case that Paul must be wrong in his conclusions—whether or not we can detect the weak point in his arguments?

This is a very important matter—for Jews as well as for non-Jews. We have been talking about the Jewish people's spiritual advantages or lack of them. But, although the Jew's apparent advantages are different from the Gentile's, his situation and the Gentile's are parallel. For we who call ourselves Christians must ask, "What advantage, then, is there is being a godly, churchgoing person? What value is there in baptism, church membership, communion, or any other religious exercise if we are all under condemnation anyway?"

I have titled this study "Do Jews Have an Edge?" But I might as well have asked, "Do any religious people have an edge?" If we do not, then why should we bother with religion at all? Let's enjoy ourselves and sin right along with the heathen. If we *do* have an edge, then isn't it the case that it is possible to please God by our religious practices and be saved by them after all?

The Jews' Advantages

Paul's answer is that circumcision and being Jewish are true advantages, although they are not the kind of advantages we are thinking of if we

wrongly suppose that one can be saved by them.

To do justice to Paul's thinking, we need to look ahead to the list of Jewish advantages appearing not here in Romans 3 but in chapter 9. The passage at hand encourages us to do this, because after Paul asks, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?" he answers, "Much in every way! *First of all*, they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (vv. 1-2, italics mine). The very fact that Paul says "first" leads us to look for what is also second and third and so on.

Paul lists only one advantage in Romans 3: "the very words of God." This had led some commentators to note that the Greek word *proton* (translated "first of all") can also mean "chiefly" or "as a matter of first importance." But, as John Murray points out, "It makes little difference whether we regard the word he uses as 'first' or 'chiefly,'" since both inevitably suggest other advantages.

As mentioned, we do find a list of these advantages in Romans 9. Speaking of the Jews, Paul says, "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen" (vv. 4-5). These ideas are worth looking at individually.

1. *The adoption as sons.* This first term embraces what follows, for it speaks of a sovereign act of God, who—for his own good reasons and according to his own good pleasure—drew the Jewish people into a special family relationship with himself. There is a real difference between Jews, who were adopted into God's family, and Christians (both Jews and Gentiles), who enter the family of God by a new birth, being born again. But the advantages are similar. Among them, obviously, is the privilege of approaching God directly as one's Father.
2. *The divine glory.* In the context of Jewish history, this phrase refers to God's revelation of himself in glory on Mount Sinai at

the time of the giving of the law, in the Most Holy Place of the Jewish temple, and in a few other places. No other nation had this privilege.

3. *The covenants.* This word is plural, so it probably refers to the full scope of those special bondings of God to Israel generally known as the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the Davidic covenant. In each case, God promised to be certain things to his people and to do certain things for them, not because of any good in them or in anticipation of any special performance on their part, but solely for his own good pleasure.

4. *The receiving of the law.* This is the item Paul refers to as "first of all" or "chiefly" in Romans

3. We will see why this is the most important advantage later and in our next study.

5. *The temple worship.* This was an obvious advantage because, in the early days, God actually manifested himself in the tabernacle or temple. However, since the emphasis here is on "worship," the advantage actually referred to is the way in which this worship pointed the pathway to God by atoning sacrifices for sin, which prefigured the only perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Indeed, each item in the temple design and furnishings pointed forward to Jesus and was fulfilled by him.

6. *The promises.* The Old Testament (like the New Testament) is filled with promises to God's people. These are of very wide scope, covering all we could possibly need. They are sure and reliable, since it is God who has made and spoken them.

7. *The patriarchs.* This word means "fathers" and can refer to any one of the giants of Israel's past. Chiefly it refers to the first three fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (or Israel). God calls himself by their name, saying to Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6; cf. Matt. 22:32). It was an advantage to have had such

ancestry, because God had worked through these men greatly. Also, they were models of faith and godliness to their descendants.

8. *The human ancestry of Jesus Christ.* Being related to Christ did not secure salvation for Jewish people, but it was still better to be close to him and his ministry in this way than to be far from him. If nothing else, there was at least a cultural affinity out of which it was easier to understand the meaning of his teaching.

The Very Words of God

I suppose that if Paul had been asked to interrupt himself after the first two verses of Romans 3, he might have listed those eight items. And if he had been pressed even further, he might have developed a whole book or preached a whole sermon or sermons on each one. Each is a great advantage, and seeing the whole picture requires us to think a bit about each of them.

Still, we must not miss the fact that when Paul is answering the specific question "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" in Romans 3, it is not the whole list but rather the matter of possessing the very words of God alone that he stresses. In fact, although he has also asked, "What value is there in circumcision?" he does not speak of the sacraments or any other external sign as an advantage in this context. Just Scripture! That is the chief item and, in Romans 3, the only one.

This is of immense importance to us, because it is the only blessing in this long list of Jewish advantages in which Gentiles share. We cannot say as Gentiles, "Ours is the adoption as sons," for we have not been adopted as a people. We cannot say, "Ours is the divine glory" (we have never seen God's glory), or "Ours are the covenants" (though there is a covenant of grace for Christian people). We cannot claim the advantages of the temple worship or the promises made to Israel or the patriarchs or an ancestral relationship to Jesus Christ.

But we *can* say, "Ours are the Scriptures"—if we have been fortunate enough, as virtually all of us have been, to have been given the very

words of God in our language.

Can any of us experience anything in life of greater personal advantage to our souls than possession of the Holy Scriptures? Of course not! Without them we are utterly confused, adrift on a sea of human speculation where all the great questions of life are concerned. Is there a God? We do not know; at least, in our sinful state we are unable to admit the full personal significance of there being a God. Who are we? We do not know the answer to that important question. Apart from Scripture, we cannot know that we have been created in the image of the one true God and are called to glorify him and to enjoy him forever. How do we come to God? How is our sin to be dealt with? What way of life is best? Does what we do here matter? It is only from the revelation of God in the Bible that we can have sure answers to any of these life-and-death questions.

What Advantage to the "Christian"?

At this point I am sure you can see where this study is going, since I am obviously trying to take what Paul has said to the thoroughly religious person of his day, the Jew, and apply it to the thoroughly religious person of our time. Paul is answering an argument. His answer is a digression from what he has been setting out to prove in Romans 1:18-3:20. Nevertheless, the issue the apostle is dealing with here is of vital importance to everyone. No one is saved by such things as baptism, sacraments, or church attendance. No one is even saved by such an important thing as having—yes, even studying—the Bible. But that does not mean that religious practices are of no use to us or that one is acting wisely if he or she abuses, neglects, or disregards them.

So I ask this question: "What advantage, then, is there in being a godly, churchgoing 'Christian' person?" I suggest three answers.

1. *Even if God never saves you by drawing you from the darkness of your sin to saving faith in Jesus Christ, you will at least sin less because of these advantages and therefore be punished less severely.*

Some will think this a strange place to begin, but we need to begin with the hardest situation in order that we might understand, on the one hand, that there are genuine spiritual advantages (for those who will have them) and, on the other hand, that these in themselves do not save anyone. We must remember that our situation is desperate. We can do nothing for ourselves. Even knowing the truth does not save us, because in our unregenerate state we are unresponsive and even hostile to it. No one can be saved who is not born again, and the work of spiritual regeneration is God's doing.

Still, we have seen that there are degrees of punishment for sin. In Romans 2:5, Paul has spoken of individuals "storing up wrath" by frequent and persistent sin. The Lord Jesus Christ made the point when he described a servant who knows his master's will and disobeys it being beaten with many blows, while another servant who does not know his master's will and therefore unintentionally disobeys it being beaten with "few blows" (Luke 12:47-48). Even the author of the letter to the Hebrews seems to make the point when he speaks of "every violation [of the law] and disobedience" receiving "its just punishment" (Heb. 2:2). So I say, if nothing else, knowing the law of God and living in the company of people who are trying to obey God's commands and encourage each other to live godly lives is of value—even if you are not saved. For it will at least mean that you will be committing fewer sins for which you will one day be punished.

2. *Going to church and listening to the preaching of the Word of God, if you are in a good, Bible-believing church, will at least cause you to know the way of salvation, even if you do not respond to it.*

A person might argue that knowing how to be saved and yet not responding to that revelation, in fact rejecting it, is not an advantage but a disadvantage in that it undoubtedly increases one's guilt. It is a case of the servant knowing his master's will but not doing it. This is true, of course. Moreover, it is compounded if together with your knowledge you also acquire the habit of thinking of yourself as a rather fine

Christian specimen. You are worse off if you think that God must somehow think better of you just because you know much.

But it does not need to work that way. In fact, it is meant to work quite the other way. Instead of becoming proud because of your knowledge, you should be humbled by it. The first thing you learn from the Bible, if you are really profiting from it, is that you are a sinner hopelessly lost by virtue of your own sinful nature and your deliberately wicked choices; indeed, that you are under God's just wrath and doomed to perish utterly and horribly unless God is gracious to you and reaches out to save you through the work of Christ. This is what Romans is all about thus far. Who can read the first three chapters of Romans intelligently and remain proud? Who can read these chapters and fail to see the need of throwing oneself utterly upon God's mercy? As I said, knowledge of the way of salvation, including your need of it as a sinner, in itself will not save you. But it is hard to see how you can be saved without it. This is because without such knowledge you will not even begin to seek God. Most likely, you will consider yourself already saved or at least not needing salvation.

3. *The third great advantage of regular church attendance and, above all, faithful adherence to the preaching and study of the Word of God is that, although you cannot claim this as a right from God, it is through the reading and preaching of the Bible that God is most likely to save you.*

How is one born again, after all? Peter writes that we are "born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.

1 Peter 1:23-25

To hear the Word of God is the most assured path to salvation.

In the same way James wrote, "He [God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (James 1:18).

Benefiting from One's "Edge"

Years ago, when I was preaching through John, I came to the ninth chapter, where we are told the story of a man who was born blind but who was healed by Jesus from spiritual as well as physical blindness. I remember reflecting on how desperate this man's plight was and how this is intended to be a picture of our own desperate condition apart from Jesus Christ.

What was his state? For one thing, he was blind. He could not see. Others could see, but he could not. And this meant that he could not see Jesus. If Jesus had said, as Peter and John later said to a crippled man at the temple gate called Beautiful, "Look at us [me]," the man could not have looked, for he was blind. This is the state of the lost today. Jesus is preached, but they cannot see him. That is, they cannot understand who he actually is or what he has accomplished. They cannot understand the gospel. The Bible says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Again, the man whose story is told in John 9 had been blind from birth, which meant that he probably did not even greatly value sight, having never known what it was. He knew he was missing something, of course, just like many people today are vaguely aware of a missing dimension in their lives. But he did not really know what this was or even think of having his condition cured. In the story we notice that he did not ask the Lord to heal him.

Again, he was a beggar. It is a beggar's task to beg, but he did not beg for sight. He was in the habit of asking the passers-by for money, because he had none. This means that, even if sight could have been procured for some great sum, the man's case would still have been

hopeless, as grim as before. For how could he buy his sight, having nothing? In his poverty the blind man reminds us of how bankrupt we are before God.

No, there is very little to be said for this man at the moment Jesus found him. He was blind, unaware, and bankrupt. But, when I was preparing my studies of this story, I came across a saying of one of the older preachers, who observed that, although little could be said for this man, there was this one thing: he was at least in a place where Jesus was likely to go. He was by the gate leading into the temple grounds, where Jesus frequently passed by, and it was there that Jesus looked at him (he could not look at Jesus), loved him, healed him, and drew him to himself.

I apply this to you if you are reading these words but are not born again:

Your condition is not good. You are lost and under God's wrath. You are blind to God's truth. You are spiritually bankrupt. But there is this one thing. Although you cannot save yourself, as long as you can hear this or any other gospel message, you are at least where Jesus is likely to go. He loves to bless the preaching and teaching of his Word. Therefore, though your condition may be desperate, it is no worse than that of any other lost sinner before he or she was saved. The mere hearing of the Word is your advantage. Do not despise it, then. Do not say, "So, then, what advantage is there in religion?" There is a great advantage in it. "Much in every way!" (Rom. 3:2). Cling to it. Wring every possible "edge" from it. Who knows but that God will use the very Word you hear to save your soul?

Chapter 32.
"Give Me That Book!"

Romans 3:1-2

In the third chapter of Romans, in what seems almost to be an incidental reference, the apostle uses a term for the Bible that ascribes to it the

highest possible authority. In the New International Version the term is rendered in English as "the very words" of God. The King James Version has the word *oracles.* In Greek this important word is *logia*. It was the possession of these *logia*, or oracles, that constituted the chief advantage of a person's having been born a Jew, according to Paul's teaching.

God's Word or Man's Word

The fact that Paul calls this the first or chief advantage of the Jew is in itself reason to study this further—more than we were able to do in the last study. But I return to this now because of its bearing on one of the most important matters dividing today's church. The issue is the nature of the Bible. What is the Bible? Is it a divine book or a human book? Is it supernatural or natural? Is it something that is binding upon our minds and morals, or is it simply a collection of noble thoughts, which we may use or neglect according to our own perception of the issues?

Let me clarify this division by saying that there are really only three basic positions that a person can hold in regard to the Bible. Either: (1) the Bible is the Word of God, which is what this important term of Paul affirms; or (2) the Bible is a collection of the ideas and words of mere men; or (3) the Bible is a combination of the two.

The first is the classic, evangelical doctrine. That is, it is the view that has been held throughout church history. Thus, even when there were debates about the nature of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, justification by faith, and other theological issues, it was always the Bible to which those disagreeing on these matters appealed. Even heretics regarded the Bible as the Word of God. They disagreed with what the church taught, thinking the church to be wrong in its interpretation.
They themselves had to be corrected in the course of things. But everyone understood that the Bible is God's Word and is therefore entirely without error and authoritative in all it teaches. It is only in recent years that this position has been questioned.

Irenaeus, who lived and wrote in Lyons, France, in the early years of the second century, said that we should be "most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit." Martin Luther said, "Scripture, although also written of men, is not of men nor from men, but from God." John Calvin wrote:

This is the principle that distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak of themselves, but, as organs of the Holy Spirit, uttered only that which they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. All those who wish to profit from the Scriptures must first accept this as a settled principle, that the Law and the prophets are not teachings handled on at the pleasure of men or produced by men's minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit.

When we speak of the Bible as the Word of God, we do not deny that the message of the Bible is also expressed in human language, the point Luther was making in the words I quoted. We must stress this, because some have fallen into thinking that the words of the Bible were made known to the human writers in a mechanical way so that they were mere scribes, thereby bypassing their own vocabularies and thought processes. But, of course, this is not the evangelical view. Each of the writers I have quoted understood that.

When we speak of the classic church view—that the Bible is the very Word of God—we mean that by the process known as inspiration, which we freely admit we do not fully understand, God so guided the human authors that the result, in the whole and in the parts, is what God desired to be expressed. The Bible is expressed in human words; but it is also the Word of God from beginning to end, and it is entirely truthful because God is truthful.

The second view, that the Bible is the words of mere men, is the view of liberalism and neoorthodoxy, though many of the neoorthodox theologians were willing to listen to the Bible carefully. Karl Barth is a

chief example. Neoorthodoxy held that God is so transcendent, so far above us, so separated from where we are, that he does not actually speak in human words but rather reveals himself in ways that we cannot even talk about. So what we have in the Bible is men testifying in their own words to what they believed God said in this nonverbal fashion.

Of course, classic liberalism is a step below this. Liberalism sees the Bible only as a collection of human writings—inspiring at times, perhaps even embodying the highest thoughts, ethics, and aspirations of the human race, but nevertheless only a human book and therefore without any absolute authority. To the liberal, the Bible can, in principle, be rejected utterly.

The third position is the one the evangelical church is particularly wrestling with today. It is the view that the Bible is the Word of God and the words of men combined—not in the sense that God has spoken infallibly through the human authors, the classic view, but in this sense: When you read the Bible you find things there that have certainly come to us from God and are therefore truthful. But we also have to admit (so the argument goes) that when we read the Bible we also find things that are not truthful, things we know to be in error. Because we know that God does not speak that which is untruthful, these things must come from mere human beings, from human beings alone. Therefore the Bible is a mixture of human words and divine words, and it is the task of scholarship to separate the two, extracting the kernels of divine truth from the human chaff.

Of course, what happens in this framework is that the scholar becomes God so far as the revelation is concerned. That is, the scholar becomes the authority who tells us what is true and what is not true, what is of God and what is not of God, what we are to believe and what we are not to believe. And the danger is that, because we are sinners (which includes the scholars who, perhaps at this point, are even greater sinners than the rest of us), we try to weed out the things we do not want to hear and so refashion the divine revelation to suit our own desires or notions. Thus the powerful, reforming voice of God in the church is forgotten.

"The Oracles of God"

Romans 3:2 has bearing on this controversy, as I said. And the reason is that it uses a word for the Scriptures that identifies them in the whole and in their parts as God's very words. The term (*logia*) occurs in three other passages (Acts 7:38, Heb. 5:12, and 1 Peter 4:11), and in each case the word indicates that the Old Testament Scriptures, to which these New Testament verses refer, were regarded by the New Testament authors as "oracular."

No one has written more effectively on the full authority of the Bible, nor has anyone more carefully analyzed these and other key terms, than Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1887 to 1921. During those years the full storm of German liberalism was breaking over the American churches, and Warfield set out to counter it academically, thereby producing a remarkable collection of carefully reasoned studies of the Bible's words for itself and its teaching. These have been brought together in a volume entitled *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible,* which is in my opinion still the most important single work on the nature and authority of the Bible in the English (and probably any) language.

In the chapter of this work dealing with the term *logia*, Warfield explores four separate bodies of literature. First, he looks at the word in the classical Greek authors, that is, as it was used by such writers as Aristophanes, Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, and others. His conclusion is that: "In *logion* [the singular form of *logia*] we have a term expressive, in common usage at least, of the simple notion of divine revelation, an oracle, and that independently of any accompanying implication of length or brevity, poetical or prose form, directness or indirectness of delivery. This is the meaning of *logion* in the mass of profane Greek literature."

Next Warfield examined the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament made between 250 and 150 B.C., and found that in this

translation *logia* was regularly used as a rendering of *ʾmerah*, which means "utterances," particularly the utterances of God.

Third, Warfield examined the works of the Philo, the Hebrew-Christian philosopher of
Alexandria. Philo used *logia* to express whatever in the highest sense was a word from God, that is, an oracle from heaven. Moreover, he identified those words with what is recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Says Warfield, "To Philo all that is in Scripture is oracular, every passage is a *logion*, of whatever character or length; and the whole, as constituted of these oracles, is *ta logia*, or perhaps even *to logion*—the mass of *logia* or one continuous *logion*."

The last body of material examined by Warfield was the writings of the early Christian fathers: Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Ignatius. Here again he found usage consistent with what had gone before.

Warfield then gives this summary of the use of *logia* and *logion*:

No lower sense can be attached to it in these instances than which it bears uniformly in its classical and Hellenistic usage: it means, not "words" barely, simple "utterances," but distinctively "oracular utterances," divinely authoritative communications, before which men stand in awe and to which they bow in humility: and this high meaning is not merely implicit, but is explicit in the term. It would seem clear again that there are no implications of brevity in the term: it means not short, pithy, pregnant sayings, but high, authoritative, sacred utterances.... It characterizes the utterances to which it is applied as emanations from God.

In reference to Romans 3:2, which he discusses at the end of his study, Warfield says, "The very point of this use of the word is that it *identifies* the Sacred Books with the Oracles." He elaborates:

That is to say, we have unobtrusive and convincing evidence here that the Old Testament Scriptures, as such, were esteemed by the writers of

the New Testament as an oracular book, which in itself not merely contains, but is the "utterance," the very Word of God; and is to be appealed to as such and as such deferred to, because nothing other than the crystallized speech of God.... Let him that thinks them something other and less than this, reckon, then, with the apostles and prophets of the New Covenant—to whose trustworthiness as witnesses to doctrinal truth he owes all he knows about the New Covenant itself, and therefore all he hopes for through this New Covenant.

Strength and Weakness

I do not want anyone to think, just because I have taken so much space to record Warfield's careful work in this area, that the issues are of mere academic interest. The case is exactly the opposite. The point at issue is that if the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, as Paul affirms by the use of the word *logia* in Romans 3:2, then they inevitably bear within themselves the truth, authority, and power of God. And where they are known, studied, and believed, there God is and will be powerfully at work. In other words, God will be doing what he said he would do through his word in Isaiah 55: "My word... will not return to me empty,/but will accomplish what I desire/and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (v. 11).

I do not hesitate to say that the weaknesses of the liberal church and the strengths of the evangelical church (for all its failures) can be traced precisely to this point: their understanding of and, consequently, their use of (or failure to use) Scripture.

Several years ago I had the task of finding a person to write a foreword to a small booklet on
"Freedom and Authority," written by J. I. Packer, which the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy produced as part of its ten-year program to "elucidate, vindicate and apply the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of Scripture and a necessity for the health of the church." At once I thought of Charles W. Colson because of his years in government and his work with Prison

Fellowship. I thought he could put the case for a link between freedom and authority well.

Colson agreed to write the foreword, but what I got back was not what I expected. It was better. Colson told how, when he had first heard of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, he thought that its cause did not concern him. He was dealing with "practical" issues, not "ivorytower theology." But he said that he changed his mind when he saw the effects of a high and low view of Scripture on the front lines of spiritual warfare in the prisons. Colson wrote:

Experiences in the past two years have profoundly altered my thinking. The authority and truth of Scripture is not an obscure issue reserved for the private debate and entertainment of theologians; it is relevant, indeed critical for every serious Christian—layman, pastor, and theologian alike.

My convictions have come, not from studies in Ivory Tower academia, but from life in what may be termed the front-line trenches, behind prison walls where Christians grapple in hand-to-hand combat with the prince of darkness. In our prison fellowships, where the Bible is proclaimed as God's holy and inerrant revelation, believers grow and discipleship deepens. Christians live their faith with power. Where the Bible is not so proclaimed (or where Christianity is presumed to rest on subjective experience alone or content-less fellowship) faith withers and dies. Christianity without biblical fidelity is merely another passing fad in an age of passing fads. In my opinion, the issue is that clear-cut.

Why is it that "believers grow and discipleship deepens" when the Bible is proclaimed as God's inerrant revelation? It is because of what God does through it. Let me list a few of the things God does.

1. *Unsaved men and women are born again by the work of the Holy Spirit operating through the Bible.* That is why Peter tells Christians, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23), and why James declares, "He chose to give us birth

through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (James 1:18). Nothing else will save a lost sinner—not philosophy, not history, not science. Jesus says, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6). If we are to experience divine life, we must experience it in the only way it can come—through the Bible as the Holy Spirit works through it.

2. *Christians are convicted of sin and enabled to turn from it by the power of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Bible.* Paul speaks of this in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is Godbreathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." Scripture teaches us in a general way, of course. But it also rebukes our sin, corrects us, and then leads us in righteousness.

3. *Christians are sanctified, or made holy, through the Bible.* Jesus spoke of this when he prayed to his Father in that great intercessory prayer for the church recorded in John 17: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (v. 17). To be sanctified means to be "set apart" for God and his purposes; it is what every Christian should be. Jesus says that we attain this commitment or orientation by our study of and obedience to God's Word.

4. *Christians learn the will of God through the Bible, and it is through the Bible that they are given wisdom to apply the details of Scripture to their daily lives.* The Bible does not give us magical instructions for making the many thousands of decisions we need to make in life. But it does give sound principles to guide us in our choices. As we read and study the Bible, God speaks to us by means of these principles and leads us in the ways of truth and righteousness.

This World's Most Precious Possession

The end of this study is in the form of questions, and they are these: When you hold a copy of the

Word of God in your hands, do you recognize what the Bible truly is? Do you see it as God's Book? Do you thank God for it? Do you prize it above all earthly possessions? Do you make it your chief goal in life to know it and live by it?

Let me tell you what John Wesley, that great evangelist of the eighteenth century, wrote about the Bible:

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God, just hovering over the great gulf 'till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone. Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book—for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: "Lord, is it not thy word, 'If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God'? Thou hast said, 'If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know thy will."

That should be the cry of your heart if you know the Bible to be what it truly is: "the very words of God."

Only the Spirit of God working through that book, the Bible, will bring you to spiritual life and save your soul. Only that book and the Spirit of God working through it will sanctify you, making you like Jesus. Only that working will avert that great downward spiral of sin, both personal and cultural, which is described in Romans.

Chapter 33.

Two More Questions

Romans 3:3-8

It is not often that you or I get to witness an exceptional mind at work, particularly in a debate or other confrontational situation. The presidential debates, which have become a staple of our election process every four years, should provide it. But they do not. Usually they are only presentations of well-rehearsed positions, with little true interaction, and they are slanted to the media and what we have come to call "image building" and "nonverbal communication." Law courts, where legal questions are argued and decided, could provide an example, but the discussions are usually humdrum and technical. Besides, few of us actually have opportunities to witness trials. The closest examples of settings in which most of us can see keen minds at work are those rare television programs like Ted Koppel's "Nightline" or William Buckley's "Firing
Line."

The apostle Paul was a keen-thinking individual, perhaps one of the sharpest men who ever lived. But we do not have copious places at which to observe his mind in action. In Acts, which records the progress of his missionary journeys, we are told repeatedly that Paul went into the Jewish synagogues and "reasoned" with the Jews (cf. Acts 9:22; 17:2-3, 17; 18:4, 28; 19:8). But there is almost no record of the form these debates took or of how Paul dealt with the questions his opponents would have been asking.

As I say, there are not many places where we can see Paul's sharp mind in action. But here in the third chapter of Romans we at least get a glimpse into the kind of back-and-forth reasoning that must have taken place again and again in the setting of Paul's missionary expositions.

The first two chapters of Romans contain the bedrock teaching of the apostle as to the nature and universality of human sin. All that he has said in those chapters is to be summarized in chapter 3.

But Paul seems to have been hearing in his mind the questions that sharp Jewish opponents had thrown up at him over the years, and he is therefore reluctant to move on to his summary without dealing with at least the most important of them. We have already looked at one of these questions: "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?" (Rom. 3:1). In following Paul's logic at this point, we have seen that there are genuine advantages to the possession of spiritual things, even though they in themselves do not guarantee salvation. In particular, it is a great advantage to possess the Word of God.

In verses 3 through 8 of this chapter Paul deals with two more questions. In the text there are actually seven question marks as the apostle phrases these questions, no doubt reflecting ways in which they had been voiced to him. But there are really only two basic questions, and it is these that Paul answers before moving on to the great summary of verses 9 through 20.

The First Question: God's Faithfulness

The question Paul raises in verse 3—"What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?"—grows out of what was being discussed previously.

In the first verses of the chapter Paul has defended the value of circumcision (the chief Jewish sacrament) and the possession of the Old Testament (the Jews' Bible), while at the same time maintaining his chief point: namely, that Jews are not saved by these things any more than Gentiles are saved by human morality or good works, and that Jews and Gentiles all therefore equally stand under the just condemnation of God apart from faith in Jesus Christ. "But," says Paul's opponent, "if Jews are not saved by these things and are therefore perishing in unbelief (since we all know that the majority of Jews do not believe in Jesus), isn't God then proved to be unfaithful to his people—since he has made an eternal covenant with them?" If Paul is right, God would have to be unfaithful. But since God *is* faithful, as

both Paul and his opponents would acknowledge, isn't it true that Paul's arguments about the Jews being lost without Jesus Christ are erroneous?

This is an important question. And one way we know it is important is that Paul returns to it in the second major section of Romans (chapters 9-11), where he carefully answers two questions: Has God failed with the Jews? and Is God unjust in his treatment of them?

In these later chapters Paul deals with the issue by making the following six points:

1. *God is sovereign in human affairs and does all things justly, even if this means passing over the mass of Jewish people for a time (Rom. 9:1-21).* Paul makes this point by reviewing God's sovereign choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in order to form the Jewish people and establish the Messiah's line—while passing over Ishmael and Esau. If salvation is by election and therefore by grace, there can be no injustice in God's choosing to pass over anybody.

2. *God prophesied that Israel as a whole would reject Christ and that he would offer the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom. 9:22-33).* This was meant to keep Israel conscious of the very nature of the gospel, namely, that it is by grace—since Jews could never claim salvation as a right. Because of these prophecies (and warnings), the unbelief of the Jews, so very evident in Paul's day, should have come as a surprise to no one.

3. *The offer of the gospel to the Gentiles was nevertheless for Israel's own good, since it was intended to provoke them to jealousy and therefore faith (Rom. 10:1-21).* It was a "last resort" by God to reach out to those who had already rejected him.

4. *In spite of the universal offer of the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews and Israel's jealousy of that fact, a remnant of Jews is nevertheless being saved (Rom. 11:1).* Paul cites himself as an example. "I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I

am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin."

5. *This situation is no different from what it has always been, because even in earlier days all*

Jews were not saved, but rather it was only a remnant that believed and was faithful (Rom. 11:224). The apostle's example here is Elijah, who in the days of Ahab considered himself to be the only faithful Israelite left, but to whom God disclosed that there were seven thousand who had not worshiped Baal. The number was larger than Elijah imagined, but it was nevertheless just seven thousand. The many other thousands of Jews living at that time were not saved.

6. *Notwithstanding Israel's present and persistent unbelief, there will yet be a day of national blessing in which God's promises to Israel will be completely fulfilled (Rom. 11:25-36).* This truth is so marvelous that Paul closes this important section of the letter with a doxology.

Not all these points are made in Paul's much briefer treatment in Romans 3. But I have given them here because they provide the framework in which the words Paul does give must be taken. When Paul asks the question, "Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?" and when he answers, "Not at all!" it is clear that he is embracing at least two of the points he makes later: (1) that God is sovereign and that all he does is just; and (2) that God will not break his promises and that, as a result, his pledges to Israel will certainly be fulfilled in the end. Again, when Paul says, "What if some did not have faith?" he indicates: (1) that in spite of great national unbelief, "some" Jews, now as then, have believed in the Messiah; and that (2) then as now the way of salvation is through the channel of faith in God's promises.

In our sin all of us naturally presume on God, trying to manipulate him in the sense that we try to oblige him to save us regardless of what we either believe or do. The Jew did it by claiming that God must save him because of God's promises to the nation. We Christians do it by

believing that God will save us because our parents were saved, because we have been baptized or confirmed or some such thing. But we cannot do that. God is faithful. He will save those he has promised to save. But not apart from faith! And not mechanically! If you are to be saved, it must be by faith in Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom God has appointed Savior.

Later Paul will say, "... if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Everyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'" (Rom. 10:9-11).

The Second Question: Our Sin

I indicated in an indirect way when dealing with verses 3 and 4 that the question there was at least reasonable and important, for it deals with the matter of God's faithfulness and rightly asks how God can be faithful to his promises if each and every member of the covenant people of Israel is not saved. That question is so important that Paul later takes three whole chapters to answer it, as we have seen. It is not this way with the second question. Did I say, "question"? It is a quibble. It is playing around. It is toying with theological matters and, as a result, deserves the scorn Paul gives it.

Yet Paul must have heard it a lot, just as we do. We gather this from the fact that he seems compelled to present it in three forms.

1. *God's role as judge.* The first form of the question has to do with God's role as judge of all the earth and could be rephrased as asking, "If our unrighteousness (or sin) is the necessary background against which God displays his wisdom, love, and mercy in salvation, how can God judge us for what therefore obviously has a good end?" We might think at this point that Paul would reply with some carefully reasoned distinction or with some truth that has formerly been hidden from us. He might reply that a good end does not justify a bad means, much the

way Godet does at this point in his commentary. Godet refers to this logical error as utilitarianism:

It [the argument that good ends justify evil means] has always been sought to justify the greatest crimes in history by representing the advantages they have resulted to the cause of humanity. There is not a Robespierre who has not been transformed into a saint in the name of utilitarianism. But to make such a canonization valid, one would require to begin by proving that the useful result sprang from the evil committed as its principle. Such is the teaching of Pantheism. Living Theism, on the contrary, teaches that this transformation of the bad deed into a means of progress, is the miracle of God's wisdom and power continually laying hold of human sin to derive from it a result contrary to its nature. On the first view, all human responsibility is at an end, and the judgment becomes a nullity. On the second, man remains fully responsible to God for the bad deed as an expression of the evil will of its author, and despite the good which God is pleased to extract from it. Such is scriptural optimism, which alone reconciles man's moral responsibility with the doctrine of providential progress.

This is an argument Paul might have used to answer the quibble of his opponent. But, as I say, he does not. Instead, he replies merely by a categorical statement regarding the certainty of God's judgment. "Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?" (v. 6). The argument is: If there is a world, there must be a God who made it, to whom all who live and act in this world are responsible. Therefore the judgment of God is a given, and any argument that would suggest it is not is fallacious.

2. *My condemnation.* The second form of the objection is like the first, but it centers more on one's own contemplated judgment than on God's role as judge. The first says, "How can God judge sin if sin actually leads to what in the end is beneficial?" Paul's answer is that God is going to judge sin regardless. The second form of the objection says, "If my sin enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, how can he condemn me?" Paul does not even

answer this, but instead passes on to the third form of the question, after which he concludes: "Their condemnation is deserved" (v. 8b).

3. *Doing evil that good may result.* The last form of the question is the most extreme, but it seems to have been the way in which Paul most heard it—both because of the way Paul refers to it here and the fact that he deals with it in other places (cf. Rom. 6:1-23). Here Paul admits that this charge had been widely disseminated against him: "Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—'Let us do evil that good may result'?" (v. 8a). That is, the more one sins, the more God is glorified. I believe this is the most extreme form of the question because, in addition merely to dismissing the judgment of God or excusing sin, this argument actually encourages the indulgence of the sinful nature and appetite by allegedly Christian people.

You have heard this argument, too. It goes by the theological name of Antinomianism: "If we are saved by grace through faith, entirely apart from any works of the law, then what does it matter whether we live righteous lives or not? Indeed, isn't it good that we sin, because then God is given even greater glory as our Savior?"

Faith, Justification, and Good Works

As soon as I put the argument in that form, we recognize—even if we have not done so before— that although Paul is answering questions put to him long centuries ago, the issue is not a past issue but a current and very critical one. Indeed, it concerns the very nature of the gospel. Is it true that the gospel of salvation by grace leads to sin? Or at least that it excuses it? Is it enough to sin and then claim glibly, "I am forgiven," without genuine repentance expressed in a repudiation of the evil and a decision to live differently, not to mention a desire to make restitution? If it is— if this is where Christianity leads—then I for one want nothing to do with it. It is a mockery. It is an offense to God's justice. But if, on the other hand, we insist on Christians doing righteous deeds—

declaring, as Paul does, that we must not sin that grace may abound—how do we preserve the true gospel of grace apart from human merit?

Here is where Roman Catholic theology and Protestant theology part company most radically. Catholics have a proper concern for works; no one can ever say that it is all right to sin and yet be saved, according to true Catholic teaching. But Catholic theology brings works into salvation in the sense that God justifies us in part by producing good works in us, so that we are saved by faith plus those good works. The Catholic formula for justification is:

Faith + Good Works = Justification

Protestants reply that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone. No works enter into justification; not even faith is a work. But Protestants add (or *should* add—there is a great deal of deficient Protestant theology at this point) that good works must follow faith if we are justified. The Protestant formula would be:

Faith = Justification + Good Works

What of the deficient Protestant theology I mentioned parenthetically? What would be the formula of Antinomianism? That formula is:

Faith = Justification - Good Works

In other words, "Let us go on sinning so that grace may increase" (cf. Rom. 6:1).

It does not take an accomplished theologian to see that this is not true Christianity. Think, for example, how Jesus insisted on a radical change of behavior for all who would follow him. He said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). He admonished those whose "faith" was only verbal, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a

foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete" (Luke 6:46-49).
Furthermore, he told the Jews of his day, "... unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

The reason all this can be said is that God never justifies a person without regenerating him or her; that is, the person being saved is given a new nature, which must and will hate sin and strive for righteousness. Paul does not spell this out in Romans 3, being content merely to scorn the position that thinks it possible to be on good terms with God and yet continue to sin. But he gets to it later—in chapter 6. There he shows that all who are saved are joined to Christ. Because Christ lives in them, they increasingly want what Christ wants. And if they find that they are not increasingly coming to hate sin and love righteousness, they are not really Christ's. They are not true Christians.

By definition, Christianity must be the most beneficial (I would say, the *only* ultimately beneficial) force in the world. Why? Because it is the work of God, and only God is or can be ultimately beneficent.

Do you doubt this? If so, you have not understood the first two chapters of Romans. Those chapters have told us of the nature and extent of human sin. They have demonstrated that men and women, left to themselves, are on a path leading away from God, the only source of true good, and that the progression along that path is always and inevitably downhill. No original or ultimate good comes from any mere man or woman, only evil. Therefore, if good is to be seen anywhere, it must be from God himself and be seen in those in whom he has planted his very nature.

What a calling, if you are a Christian! What a destiny!

"Do evil that good may result"? If you find yourself thinking that way, you are no true Christian. You are no Christian if evil in yourself and in others does not distress you. You are no Christian if you can take the

transgressions of God's law lightly. If you are a Christian, you will hate sin, repudiate it, fight against it, and strive for righteousness.

Chapter 34.

No One Righteous, Not Even One

Romans 3:9-11

In the third chapter of Romans, beginning with verse 9, the apostle summarizes the condition of every human being apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is not a pretty picture. According to Paul, Jews are not better than Gentiles, and neither are Gentiles better than Jews.
Instead, all are alike under sin, and all are thus subject to the wrath and final judgment of
Almighty God. Quoting from Psalm 14:1-3, Psalm 53:1-3, and Ecclesiastes 7:20, Paul declares: "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.'"

This is a serious charge, indeed a devastating picture of the race, because it portrays human beings as unable to do even a single thing either to please, understand, or seek after God. It is an expression of what theologians rightly call man's "total depravity."

The doctrine of total depravity is hard for the human race to accept, of course, for one of the results of our being sinners is that we tend to treat sin lightly. Most people are willing to admit that they are not perfect. It takes an extraordinary supply of arrogance for any mere human being to pretend that he or she has no flaws. Generally we do not do that. But this is far different from admitting that we are utterly depraved so far as our having any natural ability to please God is concerned. We are willing to admit that we are not perfect, but not that we are not righteous. We are willing to admit that there are things not known to us, but not that we are devoid of all spiritual understanding. We are willing to admit that we wander off the true path at times, but not that we are not even on the right path. Instead of admitting that we are running away from God, we pretend that we are seeking him.

It is vitally important that we come to terms with this bad tendency to run from the truth about ourselves. Without an accurate knowledge of our sin, we will never come to know the meaning of God's grace. Without an awareness of our pride, we will never appreciate God's greatness, nor will we come to God for the healing we so desperately need. The situation is a bit like being sick and needing a doctor. As long as we are convinced we are well (or at least almost well), we will not seek medical care. But if we know we are spiritually sick, we will turn to the Great Physician, Jesus Christ, who alone is able to heal us.

How Bad Is It?

In making the previous point—that we need to recognize how desperate the situation is so we will turn to God for help—I have used the analogy of being sick and needing a physician. But now I want to say, as I have already suggested, that according to Romans 3:9-11 the situation is even worse than that. As long as someone is merely sick, the situation is not hopeless. He or she may get better and survive. But, according to these verses and others, apart from the grace of God a person is not only spiritually sick but dead. The sinner is moribund.

The uniqueness of the Bible's teaching can be seen by noting that in the long history of the human race there have been only three basic views of human nature: (1) that man is well; (2) that man is sick; and (3) that man is dead. There are variations in these views, of course. Optimists will say that man is well, but they may disagree on exactly how well he is; perhaps he might not be as well as he possibly could be. Or again, although more pessimistic observers will agree that man is sick—that there is something wrong with him—they will differ over how serious the illness is. Man may be acutely sick, critically sick, mortally sick, and so on. In spite of these variations, there are nevertheless only three basic views.

The first view—that man is essentially well—is the view of Liberalism and, for that matter, of most persons today. If people admit that anything at all is wrong with man, generally it is only that he is not as fully healthy as he could perhaps be. This view holds that, morally and spiritually speaking, all people need is a little exercise, spiritual vitamins, perhaps a psychological checkup once a year, and so on. Many would say that the human race is even getting better and better. This is the view of all optimists.

The second view—that man is sick—is the view of the pessimist, which is to say: anyone who has reflected seriously on the true facts of human nature. Those who believe that man is sick have looked at the general optimism of the last hundred years and have found it wanting. In those earlier days, flushed with the heady success of the industrial revolution, encouraged by technological and medical advances, and goaded by the beguiling doctrine of universal and inevitable evolution, people began to believe that the human race was ascending like a rocket and that within a reasonable time all human problems would be solved. Wars would cease. Starvation would be eliminated. Disease would be conquered. Indeed, people would learn to live and work together in a spirit of universal brotherhood and cooperation. But those who look at this blithe optimism today are rightly critical: If human nature is only "slightly flawed," as the optimists believe, how come the world has not been perfected by now? Why are there still wars? Why hasn't starvation

or disease been eliminated? Why can't people get along with one another? The pessimist looks at this and concludes wisely that the situation is not good. In fact, it is terrible.

Pessimists believe that man is very sick indeed.

But not dead!

The pessimist believes that man is sick—very sick, even mortally ill—but adds, "As long as there's life there's hope." Sure, man may be ready to blow himself off the face of the earth and even destroy the planet while he is doing it. But the situation is still not hopeless, says the pessimist. We must work hard, tackle our ills and defeat them. There is no need to call the mortician yet.

The third view, the one the Bible presents, is that we humans are not well, nor even sick. We are dead so far as our being able to do anything to please, understand, or find God is concerned. That is, we are as God declared we would be when he warned Adam and Eve against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said, "... you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Our first parents did eat of it, and they did die. Thus it is true of us, as Paul said in writing to the Ephesians, that we are "dead in [our] transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Of ourselves we are as unable to respond to God as any corpse would be if someone, believing it alive, told it to do *anything.*

The Moral Nature: None Righteous

In the first part of his summary of the hopeless condition of man, the apostle speaks of man's moral nature and concludes that the human race is unrighteous. This does not mean merely that man is a bit less righteous than he needs to be to please God and somehow get to heaven. We cannot have understood the first chapter of Romans and think in those terms. Actually, when Paul says that "there is no one righteous," he means that *from God's point of view* human beings have no righteousness at all.

I emphasize "from God's point of view," not to suggest that any view other than God's is ever ultimately valid but merely to make clear that it is from this viewpoint that we need to assess the situation. This is because, if we assess the human condition from man's perspective, we will always conclude that at least some people are good—simply because they are better than what we think we observe in others.

Our problem at this point is that we think of the good we do (or *can* do), our righteousness, as being the same thing as God's righteousness, when it is actually quite different. We assume that by simply accumulating human goodness we can please God.

Let me give an illustration. Suppose that during the Vietnam War a platoon of American soldiers was captured and interred by the North Vietnamese. Imagine further that at some point in their captivity a Red Cross package arrived at the camp and that it contained, among other things, a game of Monopoly. The donor simply thought the soldiers would like to while away the long hours of their imprisonment playing it. The soldiers were glad to get the Monopoly game, but not for the reason the folks back home sent it to them. They were glad to have it because it gave them "money" with which to do camp business. Before this, if someone wanted to get something from another soldier—a cigarette, for example—he had to beg, borrow, or steal it. Now he could buy it with the Monopoly money. So the soldiers distributed the gold, yellow, blue, green, and white money and went into business.

It seems always the case among a group of Americans that one person is a naturally gifted capitalist, and this platoon was no exception. Because one man was a genius at buying low and selling high, in time he accumulated almost all the money in the camp.

Suppose further that eventually there was a prisoner-of-war exchange, and a group of North Vietnamese were exchanged for this platoon of Americans. A helicopter comes, picks them up, flies them to Da Nang, and from there it is only a matter of hours before they are back in the States on the California coast. Almost immediately the successful capitalist/soldier enters the First National Bank of San Francisco and

steps up to the counter. The teller is pleased to open an account for him. "We are glad to help our veterans," she says. "How much do you want to deposit?"

"About half a million," the ex-prisoner answers, as he pushes $500,382 in Monopoly money over the counter and through the teller's window. Of course, the teller reaches down, not for a deposit slip but for the alarm button that will call someone to take this poor deranged man away.

That is the difference between human righteousness, on the one hand, and the righteousness God requires of us, on the other. Human righteousness is like Monopoly money. It has its uses in the game we call life. But it is not real currency, and it does not work in God's domain. God requires divine righteousness, just as in America only United States dollars are legal tender. We are going to find a little bit further along in Romans that Paul will write of Israel's failure to find God, using this very distinction: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Rom. 10:3). That is, Israel wanted God to accept their own currency rather than come to Christ for the genuine currency he alone can provide.

So the first thing Paul says about the human race in his summary of its lost condition is that it has no righteousness. Verse 12 adds, "'All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"

The Sinful Mind: None Understands

The second pronouncement Paul makes about human beings in their sinful condition is that no one understands spiritual things. Again, we need to view this as a lack of spiritual perception and not merely a lack of human knowledge. If we think on the human level, comparing the "understanding" of one person with that of another, we will observe rightly that some people obviously understand a great deal about our world. And since we are impressed by that, we will be misled. We need

to see that in spiritual matters the important thing is that no one truly understands God or seeks to know him.

The best commentary upon this phrase is found in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians. The people in the church at Corinth were mostly Greeks. They prized the wisdom of the Greek philosophers, as virtually all Greeks did. Paul writes that when he was with them he did not attempt to impress them with such wisdom, but rather that he determined to know nothing while among them "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Why? He explains his decision in two ways.

First, human wisdom has shown itself bankrupt so far as coming to know God is concerned. Paul says that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:18-21). In making this indictment, Paul was only echoing what the best of the Greeks had themselves concluded. The philosophers already knew they had been unable to discover God through human reasoning or scholarship.

The second way Paul explains his decision to know nothing while among the Greeks but Christ crucified is the statement that spiritual matters can only be known by God's Spirit: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

This does not mean that a person cannot have a rational understanding of Christianity or what the Bible teaches apart from the illumination of his or her mind by the Holy Spirit. In one sense, a scholar can understand and explain theological principles as well as any other area

of human knowledge. An unbelieving philosopher can lecture accurately on the Christian idea of God. An unbelieving historian can analyze to near perfection the nature of the Reformation and describe the meaning of justification by faith. When I was at Harvard University there were non-Christian professors who could present the doctrines of Christianity so brilliantly that Christians would marvel at their lectures and be edified by them, and even unbelieving students would rise to their feet and applaud. But these professors did not believe what they were teaching. If they had been asked their opinion of what they were so accurately presenting, they would have said that it was all utter nonsense. It is in this sense that they, not being "spiritual," were unable to understand Christianity.

If we return to Romans 1, we are reminded of the cause of this ignorance. It is not that the doctrine of God (or any other doctrine of the Christian faith) is difficult to comprehend. It is rather that we do not want to move in the direction these doctrines lead us. So we suppress the truth about God, refusing to glorify or give thanks to him, and as a result our thinking becomes "futile" and our foolish hearts are "darkened" (v. 21).

The Captive Will: None Seeks God

Having spoken of our moral and intellectual failures, Paul moves at last to the area of the corrupt human will and concludes rightly that no one "seeks God."

Here again we must not think in merely human terms. If we do, we will conclude, contrary to Paul's teaching, that "seeking after God" has actually been the history of our race. I have already dealt with the academic expression of this view in our analysis of Romans 1:21-23, referring to Robert Brow's *Religion: Origins and Ideas*. Brow maintains that study of primitive peoples suggests, not that the human race has moved from primitive conceptions of God to higher conceptions of him —thus seeking after "God" constantly—but rather that the human race has been consistently running away from ideas of a high and holy God. He argues that primitive peoples generally have a truer picture of God

than we do, though they do not worship him. They believe in a great and true God who stands behind their pantheon of animistic deities or lesser gods, but they do not worship this God, because they do not fear him as much as they do the immediate and hostile powers.

F. Godet saw this and wrote, "At the root of all pagan religions and mythologies, there lies an original Monotheism, which is the historical starting-point in religion for all mankind."

But here I want to focus on the way this negative principle works in our lives and society. Consider a man who believes himself to be the perfect refutation of Paul's statement that there is *no one* who seeks God. "But I *do* seek him," this man argues. "In fact, I have been seeking him all my life. I was born into a Baptist family; but I could not find God in my Baptist home or church. So, when I grew old enough to select a church on my own, I joined a Presbyterian church. Unfortunately, that was a bad church. No one could find God there. So I joined an Episcopalian church. Over the years I have attended almost every kind of church there is. I have been to Lutheran churches, Pentecostal churches, Methodist churches, Bible churches, independent churches. I have been seeking God all my life, but I haven't found him."

The answer to this man's argument is that he has not been *seeking* God. He has been running away from him. When God got close to him in his Baptist home and church, he left that church and joined a Presbyterian congregation. And when things got hot for him there—God can work in Presbyterian churches—he joined an Episcopal church. When God got too close to him there, he left it for a succession of other denominations. If he gets to the end of this circle, he will probably look around carefully to see if anyone is looking and then jump back in at the beginning.

This man is not seeking God. He is merely using religious trappings to disguise his intention of running away from the Almighty and everything true commitment and faith would entail.

Pursued by God

I come back to where I was at the beginning of this study and say that according to the Bible no one unaided by the Spirit of God (1) has any righteousness by which to lay a claim upon God;

(2) has any true understanding of God; or (3) seeks God. But what we do not have and cannot do and have not done, God has done for those who are being saved.

What exactly has God done? First, God has sought us. We had run from him, but like "The Hound of Heaven" God pursued us relentlessly. Some of us ran from God for a long time and can recall the days of our waywardness well. If God had not pursued us, we would have been lost eternally. We would never have come to God by ourselves. Now we know that no one is ever saved who has not first been pursued by God and been found by him. Second, God has given us understanding. He has done this by making us alive in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, as a result of which our eyes have been opened to see things spiritually. This does not mean that we perfectly comprehend all things about God and his ways, but we now truly "understand" in the sense that we believe these things and respond accordingly. Last of all, God has given us a righteousness that we did not have in ourselves and, in fact, could never have had—*his* righteousness, which is the righteousness of Jesus Christ and is the ground of our salvation.

Chapter 35.
The Bondage of the Will

Romans 3:11

Early in my study of Paul's letter to the Romans, I had an opportunity to teach this book to two separate groups of people for a week at a time. I covered a large number of Bible doctrines, touching on everything from election to glorification. But in both of those settings the point the listeners kept coming back to in question periods was the matter of the human will and its freedom or bondage.

I had said that if we are as desperately lost in sin as Romans 1:18-3:20 says we are, then, unaided by the Spirit of God, no one can come to God, choose God, or even believe on Jesus Christ and be saved—unless God first makes that person alive in Christ and draws him or her. But this is what troubled many. It did not seem consistent with what they knew of their ability to choose what they wanted to choose or reject what they wanted to reject. What is more, it seemed inconsistent with the many free offers of the gospel found throughout Scripture. What does the Bible mean when it says that we are "dead in [our] transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1)? Does that mean that we are really unable to respond to God in any way, even when the gospel is proclaimed to us? Or do we still have at least that ability? If we can respond, what did Jesus mean when he said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44a), or "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65)? On the other hand, if we cannot respond, what is the meaning of those passages in which the gospel is offered to fallen men and women? For example, the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!" (Isa. 55:1). What about such invitations? Furthermore, how can a person be held responsible for failing to believe in Jesus if he or she is unable to do so?

These questions come to us from Romans 3:10-11 because of the words with which Paul sums up man's spiritual condition. He has said that we are all unrighteous: "'There is no one righteous, not even one.'" Now he adds: "There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.'" The way we interpret this verse has a lot to do with how we regard man's rock-bottom inability (or ability) where spiritual things are concerned.

The Debate in Church History

We might suspect, even if we knew nothing of the past, that a question as important as this must have been discussed often in church history, and this is indeed the case. In fact, the very best way of approaching the

subject is through the debates that took place between the theological giants of past days.

The first important debate was between Pelagius and Saint Augustine toward the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century. Pelagius argued for free will. He did not want to deny the universality of sin, at least at the beginning. He knew that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23a), and in this he wanted to remain orthodox. But Pelagius could not see how we can be responsible for something if we do not have free will in that matter. If there is an obligation to do something, there must be an ability to do it, he argued. Pelagius believed that the will, rather than being bound by sin, is actually neutral—so that at any moment or in any given situation it is free to choose either good or evil.

This worked itself out in several ways. For one thing, it led to a view of sin as only those deliberate and unrelated acts in which the will actually chooses to do evil. Thus any necessary connection between sins or any hereditary principle of sin within the race was forgotten. Pelagius argued further that:

1. The sin of Adam affected no one but himself, and
2. Those born since Adam have been born into the same condition Adam was in before his fall, that is, into a position of neutrality so far as sin is concerned, and
3. Today human beings are able to live free from sin if they want to.

This is probably the root view of most people today, including many Christians. But it is faulty, because it limits the nature and scope of sin and because it leads to a denial of the necessity for the unmerited grace of God in salvation. Moreover, even when the gospel is preached to a fallen sinner (according to this view), what ultimately determines whether he or she will be saved is not the supernatural working of God through the Holy Spirit, but rather the person's will, which either

receives or rejects the Savior—and this gives human beings glory that ought to go to God.

In his early life Augustine had thought along the same lines. But when he became a Christian and as he studied the Bible, Augustine came to see that Pelagianism does not do justice to either the biblical doctrine of sin or the grace of God in salvation.

Augustine saw that the Bible always speaks of sin as more than mere isolated and individual acts. It speaks of an inherited depravity as a result of which it is simply not possible for the individual to stop sinning. Augustine had a phrase for this fundamental human inability: *non posse non peccare*. It means "not able not to sin." That is, unaided by God, a person is just not able to stop sinning and choose God. Augustine said that man, having used his free will badly in the fall, lost both himself and his will. He said that the will is free of righteousness, but it is enslaved to sin. It is free to turn from God, but not to come to him.

As far as grace is concerned, Augustine saw that apart from grace no one can be saved.
Moreover, it is a matter of grace from beginning to end, not just of "prevenient" grace or partial grace to which the sinner adds his or her efforts. Otherwise, salvation would not be entirely of God, God's honor would be diminished, and human beings would be able to boast in heaven. Any view that leads to such consequences must be wrong, for God has declared: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

In defending his views, Augustine won the day, and the church supported him. But Christianity gradually drifted back in the direction of Pelagianism during the Middle Ages.

At the time of the Reformation the battle erupted again, first between Martin Luther and a Dutch humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and then between Jacob Arminius and the followers of John Calvin.

The most interesting debate was between Luther and Erasmus. The latter had been sympathetic to the Reformation in its early stages because, like most wise people of the time, he saw that the church badly needed to be reformed. But Erasmus did not have Luther's spiritual undergirdings, and at last he was prevailed upon to challenge the reformer. Erasmus chose to write on the freedom of the will. He said that the will must be free—for reasons very much like those given by Pelagius. Still, the subject did not mean a great deal to Erasmus, and he counseled moderation, no doubt hoping that Luther would do likewise.

It was no small matter to Luther, however, and he did not approach the subject with detached moderation. Luther approached the matter zealously, viewing it as an issue upon which the very truth of God depended. In one place, in the midst of demolishing the Dutch humanist's views, Luther wrote: "I give you hearty praise and commendation on this... account—that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the central issue."

In this work, *The Bondage of the Will*, which Luther considered his greatest theological writing, the reformer did not deny the psychological fact that men and women do make choices. This is so obvious that no one can really deny it. What Luther affirmed was that *in the specific area of an individual's choice of God or failure to choose God*, the will is impotent. In this area Luther was as determined to deny the will's freedom as Erasmus was determined to affirm it. We are wholly given over to sin, said Luther. Therefore, our only proper role is humbly to acknowledge our sin, confess our blindness, and admit that we can no more choose God by our enslaved wills than we can please him by our sullied moral acts. All we can do is call on God for mercy, knowing even as we seek to do so that we cannot even call for mercy unless God is first active to convict us of sin and lead us to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

In trying to convey Luther's thought, I used to say that although we have free will in many areas, we do not have free will in all areas. That is, we can choose what we want in some things—little things like what we will select from a menu, what color tie we will put on, what job we

will take. But we do not have free will in the important areas. If I have an intelligence quotient of 120, I cannot make it 140 just by the exercise of my free will. Unless I am an Olympic-class athlete, I cannot choose to run a mile in four minutes or the hundred-yard dash in nine seconds. I used to say that in exactly the same way, none of us can choose God by the mere exercise of our will.

Edwards's "Freedom of the Will"

I do not present the matter that way anymore, however, and the reason I do not is that in the meantime I have read Jonathan Edwards's treatise on the freedom of the will and now think differently. Not on the basic issue or in my conclusions—but in the way I define the will.

Let me explain.

It can hardly escape anyone who looks at Edwards's treatise that at least on the surface Edwards seemed to be saying the exact opposite of what Saint Augustine and Martin Luther had said. Luther titled his study *The Bondage of the Will*, in opposition to Erasmus's *Freedom of the Will*, whereas Jonathan Edwards's treatise is titled "A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will." The title does not specifically state that Edwards was asserting the will's "freedom," only that he was going to investigate the prevailing ideas about it, but, it is not by chance that Edwards used words opposite to Luther's. In the end, Edwards came out on the same side as Luther and of all the great biblical theologians before him. But along the way he made a unique contribution to the subject for which the idea of the "freedom" of the will was appropriate.

In this important work the first thing Edwards did was to define the will. Strangely, no one had done this previously. Everyone had operated on the assumption that we all know what the will is. We call the will that mechanism in us that makes choices. Edwards saw that this was not accurate and instead defined the will as "that by which *the mind* chooses anything." That may not seem to be much of a difference, but it is a major one. It means, according to Edwards, that what we choose is not

determined by the will itself (as if it were an entity to itself) but by the mind, which means that our choices are determined by what we think is the most desirable course of action.

Edwards's second important contribution was in the treatment of what he termed "motives." He asked, "Why is it that the mind chooses one thing rather than another?" His answer: The mind chooses as it does because of motives. That is, the mind is not neutral. It thinks some things are better than other things, and because it thinks that way it always chooses the "better" things. If a person thought one course of action was better than another and yet chose the less desirable alternative, the person would be acting irrationally or, to use other language, he would be insane.

Does this mean that the will is bound, then? Quite the contrary. It means that the will is free. It is always free. That is, it is free to choose (and always will choose) what the mind thinks is best.

But what does the mind think is best? Here we get to the heart of the problem as it involves choosing God. When confronted with God, the mind of a sinner never thinks that the way of God is a good course. The will is free to choose God; nothing is stopping it. But the mind does not regard submission to God and serving God as being desirable. Therefore, it turns from God, even when the gospel is most winsomely presented. It turns from God because of what we saw in Romans 1. The mind does not want God to be sovereign. It does not consider the righteousness of God to be the way to personal fulfillment or happiness. It does not want its true sinful nature exposed. The mind is wrong in its judgments, of course. The way it chooses is actually the way of alienation and misery, the end of which is death. But human beings think sin to be the best way. Therefore, unless God changes the way we *think*—which he does in some by the miracle of the new birth—our minds always tell us to turn from God. And so we do turn from him.

Moral Inability

The third great contribution Edwards made to understanding why the will never chooses God, although it is free, concerns responsibility, the matter that had troubled Pelagius so profoundly. Here Edwards wisely distinguished between what he called "natural" inability and what he termed "moral" inability. Let me give a simple illustration.

In the natural world there are animals that eat nothing but meat. They are called carnivores from *caro, carnis,* which means "meat." There are other animals that eat nothing but grass or plants. They are called herbivores from *herba,* which means vegetation. Imagine that we have captured a lion, a carnivore, and that we place a bundle of hay or a trough of oats before him. He will not eat the hay or oats. Why not? Is it because he is physically, or naturally, unable to eat them? No. Physically he could munch on the oats and swallow them. But he does not and will not, because it is not in his nature to eat this kind of food. Moreover, if we could ask why he will not eat the herbivore's meal and the lion could answer, he would say, "I cannot eat this food, because I hate it. I will only eat meat."

Now think of the verse that says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8a) or of Jesus' saying, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread, he will live forever..." (John 6:51). Why will a sinful man or woman not "taste and see that the Lord is good" or feed upon Jesus as "the living bread"? To use the lion's words, it is because that person "hates" such food. The sinner will not come to Christ—because he does not want to. It is not because he cannot come physically.

Someone who does not hold to this teaching (there are many today) might say, "But surely the Bible says that anyone who will come to Christ may come to him. Didn't Jesus invite us to come? Didn't he say, 'Whoever comes to me I will never drive away'" (John 6:37b)? The answer is yes, that is exactly what Jesus said. But it is beside the point. Certainly anyone who wants to come to Christ may come to him. That is why Jonathan Edwards insisted that the will is not bound. The fact that we may come is what makes our refusal to seek God so unreasonable and increases our guilt. But who is it who wills to come?

The answer is: No one, except those in whom the Holy Spirit has already performed the entirely irresistible work of the new birth so that, as a result of this miracle, the spiritually blind eyes of the natural man are opened to see God's truth, and the totally depraved mind of the sinner, which in itself has no spiritual understanding, is renewed to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior.

Old and Practical Doctrine

This is not new teaching, of course, although it seems new to many who hear it in our own quite superficial age. It is merely the purest and most basic form of the doctrine of man embraced by most Protestants and even (privately) by many Catholics. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England say: "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us [that is, being present beforehand to motivate us], that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that will" (Article 10).

In the same way the Westminster Larger Catechism states, "The sinfulness of that state whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually" (Answer to Question 25).

I suppose that at this point there are people who are willing to agree, somewhat reluctantly, that the inability of the will to choose God or believe on Christ is the prevailing doctrine of the church and perhaps even the teaching of the Bible. But they are still not certain of this teaching's value and may even consider it harmful. They ask, "If we teach that men and women cannot choose God (even if this is true), don't we destroy the main impetus to evangelism and undercut the missionary enterprise? Isn't it better just to keep quiet about it?"

It should be a sufficient answer to this worry to say that the very person who gave us the Great
Commission said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

But let me answer instead by saying that, contrary to this doctrine being a hindrance to evangelism, it is actually the greatest possible motivation for spreading the gospel. If it is true that the sinner, left alone, never *naturally* seeks out God, how is that individual ever going to find God unless other people, sent by God, carry the gospel to him (or her). "Ah, but even then the person cannot respond," says the objector. True enough. Not by himself. But it is through the preaching and teaching of the gospel that God chooses to call people to faith, and anyone who obeys God and takes the gospel to the lost can be encouraged to know that God will work through this means. Moreover, the evangelist will pray for the sinner, since nothing but the work of God—certainly not the eloquence or charm of man—can save him.

"But surely you must not tell the sinner that he cannot respond unless God first does a work of regeneration in him?" argues a skeptic. On the contrary, that is exactly what the sinner needs to know. For it is only in such understanding that sinful human beings learn how desperate their situation is and how absolutely essential is God's grace. If we are hanging on to some confidence in our own spiritual ability, no matter how small, we will never seriously worry about our condition. There will be no sense of urgency. "Life is long. There will be time to believe later," we say, as if we can bring ourselves to believe when we want to, perhaps on our deathbed after we have done what we wish with our lives. At least we are ready to take a chance on it. But if we are truly dead in sin, as Paul says we are, and if that involves our will as well as all other parts of our psychological and spiritual makeup, we will find ourselves in near despair. We will see our state as hopeless apart from the supernatural and totally unmerited workings of the grace of God.

And that is what God wants! He will not have us boasting of even the smallest human contribution to salvation. It is only as we renounce all

such vain possibilities that he will show us the way of salvation through Christ and lead us to him.

Chapter 36.
No One Who Does Good

Romans 3:12

I do not know why God should bother to speak to us about something more than once, like a parent trying to correct a naughty child: "Johnny, get out of the mud. Johnny, stop climbing in the tree; you'll fall. Johnny, don't speak like that to your sister." But God does speak to us again and again; and it is good he does, because we need it. Indeed, most of us have trouble hearing him even then.

To my knowledge, nothing in the Bible is repeated as frequently or as forcefully as the words summing up mankind's sinful nature, which we find in Romans 3:10-12, particularly verse 12. Psalm 14:2 and Psalm 53:2, where a question is posed by the psalmist, form the basis for the apostle's answer in verses 10 and 11. Verse 12 is a verbatim quotation (from the Septuagint). Psalm 14:3 says, "All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." Psalm 53:3 almost exactly repeats that charge: "Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." Now, in Romans 3:12, the words are written out for us one more time: "All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

You would think that we might begin to get the message at this point. If God says something once, we should listen to what he says very carefully. If he says the same thing twice, we should give him our most intense and rapt attention. What if he repeats himself a third time? Then surely we should stop all else, focus our minds, seize upon each individual word, memorize what is said, and ponder the meaning of the saying intensely, attempting to apply the truth of God's revelation to our entire lives.

A More Manageable View

Yet we do not do this, and the reason we do not is that the revelation of God is too intense, too penetrating, too devastating for us to deal with it. What we do, even as Christians, is blandly to admit what God is saying while nevertheless recasting it in less disturbing terms.

I remember as a child being taught a Sunday-school lesson about sin. The teacher used a blackboard, and she began the lesson by drawing a yardstick in a vertical position on the left side of the blackboard. The yardstick was labeled "the divine measure," and a verse was written beside it: Matthew 5:48 ("Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"). A line was drawn across the top of the blackboard at the point to which the top of the yardstick reached. This was the standard. The teacher then asked, "Has anyone ever lived up to this standard?"

After a few suggestive hints, one of the students answered, "Yes, the Lord Jesus Christ lived up to it."

"That's right," said the teacher. So she drew a line parallel to the yardstick, reaching from the bottom of the blackboard to the line at the top that represented perfection. She labeled this line "Jesus Christ."

"Has anybody else lived up to this standard?" she continued. We agreed that nobody else had, although, as she pointed out, some people have done better than others. To show that some persons are better than others but that no one had reached perfection she drew a number of vertical lines, all of which fell short of the "perfection" standard. There was a line labeled "98 percent" for very good people, lines labeled "90 percent" and "80 percent" for fairly normal people, and a line labeled "40 percent" for pretty bad people. Then Romans 3:23 was added, the teacher pointing out that although some people are better than others, with God "there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of [his] glory."

As I look back on that lesson I do not doubt that it taught some very valuable things, primarily that although some people look quite good to

us by our standards, all people nevertheless fail to please God and need a Savior. As a tool for teaching this, the lesson was effective.

But the illustration on which the lesson was based has one great weakness. By putting the lines representing "98 percent" people, "90 percent" people, "80 percent" people, and "40 percent" people parallel to the line representing Jesus Christ, the diagram inevitably suggests that human goodness is essentially the same as divine goodness and that all people really need is that little bit of additional goodness which—added to their own efforts and attainments—will make up the required "100 percent." That error needs to be repudiated.

Is that what Psalm 14:3, Psalm 53:3, and Romans 3:12 teach us? Not at all! If we are to express the teaching of these verses by our diagram, we must either eliminate the lines representing human beings from the diagram entirely or else represent them not as lines stretching upward in the direction of divine perfection, but downward in varying degrees of opposition to God and his righteousness. God does not merely say that people fail to live up to his standard, although that is also true and is one way of expressing sin's nature. He says rather that we have all "turned away." We have "together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

All, Like Sheep...

I suggested earlier that when God says something more than once we should pay the most rapt attention to it, memorizing and pondering each word. I would like to do something like that now, taking one phrase of Romans 3:12 at a time. The first is: "All have turned away."

This phrase is expressed in just two words in Greek: *pantes*, properly translated "all," and *exeklinan*, a past form of a verb meaning "to deviate," "wander" or "depart" from the right way. That "right way" is outlined in the opening chapter of Romans; it is to recognize God's eternal power and divine nature and then to glorify, thank, worship, and serve him (vv. 21, 25). But it is precisely from this right way that we have deviated. Instead of seeking God and worshiping him in thankful

service, we have suppressed the truth about him and gone our own way, inventing false gods to take the true God's place and finding our intellect and morals to be increasingly debased as a result.

This indictment includes every human being. At the beginning of the verse the inclusiveness is expressed positively by the strong word *all.* At the end it is expressed negatively by the words *not even one.* One commentator writes, "As respects well-doing there is not one; as respects evildoing there is no exception."

But Paul's words do not only draw our attention to Romans 1, where the departure of men and women from the right way is spelled out. They also make us think of that well-known verse in Isaiah, where sinners are compared to sheep who cannot find their way: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way..." (Isa. 53:6). Ah, that is the problem! Not only have we not gone God's way, we have not even gone in ways marked out by other people. We have each gone *our own* way. Consequently, each of us is basically set against all others, and we pursue our own well-being and desires to the neglect or hurt of other people.

I like some words that the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth offers at this point in his famous commentary on Romans, for they suggest that Paul's condemnation of the race is not merely a matter of biblical revelation but is the judgment of history as well. "The whole course of history pronounces this indictment against itself," Barth begins. So "how can a man be called 'historically minded' if he persistently overlooks it?" He continues:

If all the great outstanding figures in history, whose judgments are worthy of serious
consideration, if all the prophets, psalmists, philosophers, fathers of the church, reformers, poets, artists, were asked their opinion, would one of them assert that men were good or even capable of good? Is the doctrine of original sin merely one doctrine among many? Is it not rather, according to its fundamental meaning..., *the* doctrine which emerges from all honest study of history? Is it not the doctrine which, in

the last resort, underlies the whole teaching of history? Is it possible for us to adopt a "different point of view" from that of the Bible, Augustine and the Reformers? What then does history teach about the things which men do or do not do?

Does it teach that some men at least are like God? No, but that—*There is none righteous, no not one.*

Does it teach that men possess a deep perception of the nature of things? or that they have experienced the essence of life? No, but that—*There is none that understandeth.*

Does it provide a moving picture of quiet piety or of fiery search after God? Do the great witnesses to the truth furnish a splendid picture, for example, of "prayer"? No—*There is none that seeketh after God.*

Can it describe this or that individual and his actions as natural, healthy, genuine, original, rightminded, ideal, full of character, affectionate, attractive, intelligent, forceful, ingenuous, of sterling worth? No—*They have all turned aside, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not so much as one.*

Commentator Robert Haldane says, "The Prophet here teaches us what is the nature of sin [and]... what are its consequences. For as the man who loses his way cannot have any rest in his mind, nor any security, it is the same with the sinner. And as a wanderer cannot restore himself to the right way without the help of a guide, in the same manner the sinner cannot restore himself, if the Holy Spirit comes not to his aid."

Corrupt and Useless

The second phrase in Romans 3:12 is also composed of just two Greek words, and the impact is similar. The first word is *hama*. It means "together." It is the equivalent of "all" in phrase one. The second word is *ēchreōthēsan*, the past tense of a verb meaning "useless" or "corrupt." I say "useless" *or* "corrupt" because the word in Greek (the language in which Paul is writing) and the word in Hebrew (the language in which the word occurs in Psalms 14 and 53) have these two closely related

meanings respectively. Together they say what Jesus meant when he described his followers as "the salt of the earth," adding, "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matt. 5:13).

What do you do if something is corrupt or useless? You throw it away and start again. I remember a scene from the movie on the life of the great renaissance painter Michelangelo, called *The Agony and the Ecstasy,* which made this point. Michelangelo was unhappy with his first attempt at painting the Sistine Chapel, and he was mulling the problem over in a local bar. The bartender served a flagon of wine drawn from a new barrel, but the wine was sour.

"This wine is sour, bartender," shouted Michelangelo.

The bartender came to the table, tasted the wine, and then spit it out. Very decisively he went over to the wine barrel, struck the bung from it with a wooden hammer and allowed the many gallons of wine to pour out into the street. "If the wine is sour, throw it out," he retorted.

Michelangelo mulled this over and then applied the principle to his first inadequate designs. He went back to the Sistine Chapel, destroyed his original frescoes—and began again.

"Useless!" "Corrupt!" We do not like to hear those words applied to ourselves, but they are God's verdict all the same. We must accept them. However, when we do, we can know that God does not merely pour us out like wine to be trodden on by passers-by. Rather, like Michelangelo, he begins again and produces a brand-new work of art. He begins anew in order to make us entirely new creations, like Jesus Christ.

No One Who Does Good

The last of Paul's phrases is the most straightforward. Indeed, it is so precise and outspoken that we can hardly miss what he is saying:

"There is no one who does good, not even one." No one at all does good —*no one!*

This verse always takes my mind back to the Old Testament, to Genesis, where there appears a similar statement of man's utter inability to please God by any human effort: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). That verse says not only that men and women do not do good, as God counts goodness; they do precisely the opposite. They do evil and that continually. I have pointed out, in a detailed exposition of this text in *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, that Genesis 6:5 teaches that sin is *internal* (rising from the "thoughts" and inclinations of the "heart"), *pervasive* (affecting our "every inclination" so that our deeds are "only evil") and *continuous* (that is, operating "all the time").

I suppose there are people who might recognize the truth of these statements, at least in the sense that they accurately express the opinions of Paul and of Moses (who wrote Genesis). But they might dismiss them as merely the harsh and gloomy thoughts of these men. Paul had been a Pharisee—and Pharisees thought poorly of everyone, didn't they? And Moses? Well, he was the great lawgiver, so he might be inclined to pessimism. What about Jesus? What did he think? Wouldn't the gentle, loving, and compassionate Jesus have a more uplifting outlook?

I think here of a section of an address given at one of the Philadelphia Conferences on Reformed
Theology by Professor Roger R. Nicole of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. It was called "The Doctrines of Grace in Jesus' Teaching," and the pertinent section stressed Christ's view of human evil. Nicole wrote:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, with all the concern, compassion and love which he showed to mankind, made some very vivid portrayals of man's condition. He did not mince words about the gravity of human sin. He talked of man as salt that has lost its savor (Matt. 5:13). He talked of

man as a corrupt tree which is bound to produce corrupt fruit (Matt. 7:7). He talked of man as being evil: "You, being evil, know how to give good things to your children" (Luke 11:13). On one occasion he lifted up his eyes toward heaven and talked about an "evil and adulterous generation" (Matt. 12:39), or again, "this wicked generation" (v. 45). In a great passage dealing with what constitutes true impurity and true purity he made the startling statement that out of the heart proceed murders, adulteries, evil thoughts and things of that kind (Mark 7:21-23). He spoke about Moses having to give special permissive commandments to men because of the hardness of their hearts (Matt. 19:8). When the rich young ruler approached him, saying, "Good Master," Jesus said, "There is none good but God" (Mark 10:18)....

Jesus compared men, even the leaders of his country, to wicked servants in a vineyard (Matt. 21:33-41). He exploded in condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees, who were considered to be among the best men, men who were in the upper ranges of virtue and in the upper classes of society (Matt. 23:2-39).

The Lord Jesus made a fundamental statement about man's depravity in John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." He saw in man an unwillingness to respond to grace—"You will not come to God" (John 5:40), "You have not the love of God" (v. 42), "You receive me not" (v. 43), "You believe not" (v. 47). Such sayings occur repeatedly in the Gospel of John. "The world's works are evil" (John 7:7); "None of you keeps the law" (v. 19). "You shall die in your sins," he says (John 8:21). "You are from beneath" (v. 23); "Your father is the devil, who is a murderer and a liar" (vv. 38, 44); "You are not of God" (v. 47); "You are not of my sheep" (John 10:26); "He that hates me hates my Father" (John 15:23-25). This is the way in which our Lord spoke to the leaders of the Jews. He brought to the fore their utter inability to please God.

Following another line of approach he showed also the blindness of man, that is, his utter inability to know God and understand him. Here again we have a whole series of passages showing that no man knows the Father but him to whom the Son has revealed him (Matt. 11:27). He compared men to the blind leading the blind (Matt. 15:14). He

mentioned that Jerusalem itself did not know or understand the purpose of God and, as a result, disregarded the things that concern salvation (Luke 19:42). The Gospel of John records him as saying that he that believed not was condemned already because he had not believed on the Son of God (John 3:18). "This is the condemnation, that... men loved the darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (v. 19). He said that only the one who has been reached by grace can walk not in darkness but have the light of life (John 8:12). The Lord Jesus emphasized that it is essential for man to be saved by a mighty act of God if he is to be rescued from his condition of misery (John 3:3, 5, 716). Even in the Lord's Prayer the Lord teaches us to say, "Forgive us our debts" (Matt. 6:12).

And this is a prayer that we need to repeat again and again. He said, "The sick are the people who need a physician" (Matt. 9:12). We are those sick people who need a physician to help us and redeem us. He said that we are people who are burdened and heavy-laden (Matt. 11:28)....

The people who were most readily received by the Lord were those who had this sense of need and who therefore did not come to him with a sense of the sufficiency of their performance. The people he received were those who came broken-hearted and bruised with the sense of their inadequacy.

After such a review of Jesus' teaching, Paul's words in Romans seem almost mild by comparison.

Grace That Is Greater Than Sin

But they are not mild, of course! They are devastating, as I indicated at the beginning of this study. Why? Why does God speak to us in these terms? The answer is obvious. It is so we might see our true condition, stop trying to excuse ourselves or whittle down the scope of God's judgment, and instead open ourselves up to God's grace. For that is what we need: grace!

Grace, grace, God's grace,

Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.

We have this grace in Jesus Christ. He alone can save us from our depravity.

Chapter 37.
The Race in Ruin

Romans 3:13-18

We have already had one very grim description of the human race in the verses that end Romans 1. There humanity was described as being "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (vv. 29-31). After a list of such vices we might think that a further catalogue would be unnecessary. Yet, as Paul gets to the end of this first main section of Romans, in which the need of people for the gospel of grace is so clearly and comprehensively pointed out, he seems to sense a need to do it all over again.

So he writes:

"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."
"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."
"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,
and the way of peace they do not know."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Romans 3:13-18

The difference between this and the passage in Romans 1 is that each of these sentences is a quotation from the Old Testament, whereas the earlier passage was made up merely of the apostle's own descriptive terminology. In other words, the verses in Romans 1 are a description of the world as Paul saw it, though he is also writing as an apostle and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The verses in Romans 3 are more specifically and obviously God's own description of the race's depravity.

Wicked Words from Wicked Men

Verses 13 and 14 are made up of three quotations from the Old Testament: Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3, and Psalm 10:7, though there are other passages that are similar. What is striking about them is that they all refer to the organs of speech: throat, tongue, lips, and mouth. And they describe how the words spoken by these organs are used to harm others. In the previous verses we have been shown how people harm themselves by turning away from God. Here we learn how they also harm others by the organs of speech that God gave them.

What do you think of first when you read these verses? If you are like me, you notice the words *cursing* and *bitterness* and think, first of all, of harsh speech, which is meant to wound another person. Perhaps when you were a child and other children said hurtful things to you, you were taught this little saying by a parent or a family friend: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Unfortunately, I am sure you also learned—if you thought about it—that this little saying is not really true. It is a way of bolstering our egos to help us get through some difficult times, but it is not true that words do not hurt us. Words do hurt; they hurt deeply. In fact, they often hurt permanently. When I think back on my childhood I can remember times when I suffered some physical injury. I broke my collarbone, damaged two teeth, tore the cartilage in my left leg, and suffered scores of bumps, bangs, and bruises. But, although I can sometimes recall the incidents, I cannot remember even one bit of the pain. Yet I remember the pain of words. I remember harsh things other people said, and I still

hurt when I recall them. Sticks and stones *do* hurt our bones—temporarily. But words wound forever.

Yet, I think that what Paul is saying here goes deeper. Indeed, it is clear that it does, because the words that describe the outcome of the harmful words of the ungodly all have to do, not with psychological injury, but with death.

Martin Luther has written the most penetrating study of this passage of any commentator I have studied, and he, with characteristic insight and brilliance, relates these evil words not just to hurtful things someone may say to us, but to false teachings or heresy, which are able to kill the soul. Luther suggests that those who teach falsely do three things:

1. *They devour the dead.* This means that they devour those who are spiritually dead already. Here he writes vividly: "Their teaching... swallows up the dead, who have gone from faith to unbelief, and swallows them up in such a way that there is no hope of returning from the death of this unbelief, unless they can be recalled by the most wonderful power of God before they descend to hell, as the Lord showed in the case of Lazarus who had been dead for four days. He says, moreover, that the grave is 'open' because they devour and seduce many people." Luther quotes Psalm 14:4 ("Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread?"), then continues: "That is, just as there is squeamishness about eating bread, even though it is eaten more frequently than other foods, so also they do not cease to devour their dead, and their disciples are never satisfied." Luther concludes, "Heresy, or faithless teaching, is nothing else than a kind of disease or plague which infects and kills many people, just as is the case with the physical plague."

And, of course, this is precisely the business the world's purveyors of words are engaged in, even those who are highly regarded by our society. I was once talking with Josh D. McDowell, the popular Christian apologist who speaks widely on college campuses for Campus Crusade for Christ and is author of the best-selling books *Evidence That*

Demands a Verdict and *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict.* McDowell was in the process of launching a nationwide campaign called "Why Wait?" whose purpose was to encourage today's teens to reject sexual experience before marriage. We were discussing this campaign and some of the pressures on today's young people. He mentioned television, pointing out that the average young person today will have seen more than ninety thousand explicit sexual encounters on television before he or she reaches the age of nineteen. Whenever anyone on television says, "I love you" to another person, the two always end up in bed. This is all "love" is allowed to mean. Moreover, the young person will probably not see even one example of anyone contracting a sexual disease as the result of such open sex practices. Nor will the TV screen show the pain or psychological damage that promiscuous sex brings. As we were talking about these things, McDowell said, "On television immorality has become morality. Sin is the norm."

But immorality kills! That is the thrust of the first three chapters of Romans and the point of Paul's specific quotations from the Old Testament. Can you see this? If you can, you need to start thinking differently about the contemporary media—television, newspapers, magazines, and movies. Their messages are not harmless entertainment, as we sometimes think. They are a death machine. They are killing our young people and many older people as well. They are an open grave for the unwary.

2. *They teach deceitfully.* The second thing Luther noticed about those who disseminate false teaching is that they teach deceitfully, which is what Paul says. "Their tongues practice deceit" (v. 13).

Luther notices the difference between the mouth, which has teeth and chews—it is referred to later ("Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness")—and the tongue, which is soft. He says: ""To teach deceitfully' is to teach a pleasing and wanton doctrine, as if it were holy, salutary, and from God, so that people who have been thus deceived hear this doctrine as if from God and believe that they are hearing him. For the message appears good to them and truthful and godly.... The

tongue is soft, it has no bones, and it licks softly. Thus their every speech only softens the heart of men to be pleased with themselves in their own wisdom, their own righteousness, their own word or work. As it says in Isaiah 30:10: 'Speak to us smooth things.

Prophesy not to us what is right.' "

Isn't this what we hear in the words of the world around us? The world generally does not speak warnings—except as threats to *other* people. On the contrary, we are encouraged to think that everything is all right with us—that we can do anything we wish, satisfy any desire, avoid any responsibility, above all, never express true repentance for anything—and everything will come out right in the end. This is damnable heresy in the literal sense! It is false teaching that will transport many to hell.

3. *They kill those who have been taught such things.* In the third of his three points Luther comes to the end result of false teaching, showing that it leads to death. "This... same flattering and pleasing doctrine... not only does not make alive those who believe it but [it] actually kills them. And it kills them in such a way that they are beyond recovery." Paul has already said the same thing himself in Romans 2: "But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger... trouble and distress" (vv. 8-9). He says it even more clearly later: "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23a).

Violent Acts from Violent Men

We are not to think that this grim description is limited to mere words, however, still less to charming (though deceptive) words. In verse 14 the deceitful and poisonous speech of verse 13 boils over into harsh "cursing and bitterness" on those who refuse to be deceived. And in verses 15-17 those who teach falsehood move from words to violent actions. These verses, quoted from Isaiah 59:7-8, describe three acts of violent men, beginning with the end result of these acts. To see the progression, we need to take them in reverse order.

1. *"The way of peace they do not know"* (v. 17). This relates to people as they are in themselves apart from God. They know no personal peace—"... the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud" (Isa. 57:20). But this also describes the effects such persons have upon others. Having no peace themselves, they disrupt the peace of other people. Commentator Haldane says rightly, "Such is a just description of man's ferocity, which fills the world with animosities, quarrels and hatred in the private connections of families and neighborhoods; and with revolution, wars and murders among nations. The most savage animals do not destroy so many of their own species to appease their hunger, as man destroys of his fellows to satiate his ambition, revenge or cupidity."

There are three ways in which men and women lack peace apart from God. First, they are not at peace with God; they are at war with him. Second, they are not at peace with one another; they hate and attack one another. Third, they are not at peace in themselves; they are restless and distressed. The only way we can find peace is by coming to the cross of Christ, where God has himself bridged the gap to man and has made peace. There sinners find peace with God and within themselves. And they are drawn together into fellowship with those who have likewise found peace and who are therefore able to live in peace with one another.

2. *"Ruin and misery mark their ways"* (v. 16). Again, this is something wicked persons experience themselves; their way is misery and ruin. But it is also something they bring on others. In other words, this verse has an active and not just a passive sense. Without a changed nature, human beings naturally labor to destroy and ruin one another, as Paul has already shown earlier.

3. *"Their feet are swift to shed blood"* (v. 15). Working backward, we come to the last of these deceitful actions. Their end is death—and not just physical death, though that would be bad enough in itself—but spiritual death, which is the death of the soul and spirit in hell. Death means separation. Physical death is the separation of

the soul and spirit from the body. Spiritual death is the separation of the soul and spirit from God. It is forever.

No Fear of God

The last phrase of this great summary of the human race in ruin is from Psalm 36:1, and it is an apt conclusion. It tells why all these other violent and wicked acts have happened: *"There is no ear of God before their eyes."*

You know, I am sure, that the word *fear* in this sentence does not mean exactly what we usually mean by the word. We mean "fright" or "terror," but in the Bible the word *fear,* when used of God, denotes a right and reverential frame of mind before him. It has to do with worshiping him, obeying him, and departing from evil. That is why we read in Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." This means that if we approach God rightly, all other things will fall into their proper places. When Romans 3:18 declares that the human race has not done this, it is saying what Paul has been stating all along. Because men and women will not know God, choosing rather to suppress the truth about him, their minds are darkened and they become fools. They claimed to be wise but "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:22).

One commentator says, "To be destitute of the fear of God is to be godless, and no indictment could be more inclusive and decisive than the charge here made."

I find it interesting, however, that Paul here also refers to "eyes." This is the sixth of the specific body references Paul makes in these verses in order to make his accusations vivid. He has referred to throats, tongues, lips, mouths, and feet. Now he mentions eyes.

Since eyes are our organs of vision, to have the fear of God before our eyes means that we have God constantly in our thoughts and in a central

position in everything that concerns us. It means that we are ever looking toward him. Here I remind you of what we see in Psalm 8:5, where man is described as being "a little lower than the heavenly beings." Earlier I pointed out, in discussing man's downward path, that it is our destiny as those made in God's image to look up to the heavenly beings and beyond them to God and thus become increasingly like God. To have the "fear of God before [our] eyes" is to do just that. It is the way of all blessing, growth, and knowledge. But if we will not do that, we will inevitably look down and become like the beasts who are below us.

I began this section with a reminder that "fear" in regard to God does not mean "fright" or "terror," but rather a right and reverential frame of mind before him. But I need to add that if we will not come to God as he presents himself to us in Jesus Christ (as Savior), it is not inappropriate to be actually afraid of the Almighty. God's wrath hangs over us. His terrible judgment awaits us as the proper recompense for our unatoned sins.

The irony of the state of human beings in our sin, however, is that we do *not* fear the one, holy, and judging God. Instead, we fear lesser entities. The pagan of Paul's day feared the vast pantheon of Babylonian, Greek, Roman, and an assortment of other gods. The pagan in the distant jungle fears the rivers, rocks, and trees. He fears the sky, the thunder, the spirits of the night. The "civilized" pagan—that is, a contemporary man or woman—fears the future, hostile neighbors, disease, technological breakdown, and a host of other dangers.

Above all, everyone fears death.

What irony: To fear these things, all of which pass away eventually, and yet not fear God, to whom all of us must one day give an accounting. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: "... you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, [but] you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, [and] you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the

oppressor..." (Isa. 51:12-13). No wonder the psalmist says, "Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways" (Ps. 128:1).

Mercy Alone

As we near the end of our studies of this first and most important section of Romans, it is helpful to note what others have written in summary about these words. One man who has written wisely is John Calvin:

In his conclusion [Paul] again repeats, in different words, what we stated at the beginning, namely, that all wickedness flows from a disregard of God. When we have forsaken the fear of God, which is the essential part of wisdom, there is no right or purity left. In short, since the fear of God is the bridle by which our wickedness is held back, its removal frees us to indulge in every kind of licentious conduct....

David, in Psalm 14:3, says that there was such perversity in men that God, when looking on them all in succession, could not find even one righteous man. It therefore follows that this infection had spread into the whole human race, since nothing is hidden from the sight of God.... In other psalms he complains of the wickedness of his enemies, foreshadowing in himself and his descendants a type of the kingdom of Christ. In his adversaries, therefore, are represented all those who, being estranged from Christ, are not led by his Spirit. Isaiah expressly mentions Israel, and his accusation therefore applies still more to the Gentiles. There is no doubt that human nature is described in these words, in order that we may see what man is when left to himself, since Scripture testifies that all who are not regenerated by the grace of God are in this state. The condition of the saints would be not better unless this depravity were amended in them. That they may still, however, remember that they are not different from others by nature, they find in what remains of their carnal nature, from which they can never escape, the seeds of those evils which would continually produce their effect in them, if they were not prevented by being mortified. For this they are indebted to the mercy of God and not to their own nature.

How could our salvation be due to anything but mercy if we really are as ruined as Paul describes us? Ruined? Yes! But we may be saved from ruin by the glorious work of our divine Savior, Jesus Christ.

Chapter 38.
Silence at Last

Romans 3:19

Now the apostle Paul comes to the end of the first main section of his letter, concluding that every human being is (1) accountable to God for what he or she has done; (2) guilty of having done countless wrong things; and (3) will never be justified by God on the basis of any supposed good works. His exact words in Romans 3:19-20 are: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

These two verses are very important, because to understand them is to understand the first great foundational truths of Christianity.

A Diagnostic Question

I want to study these verses in two separate messages, however, and one of my reasons for dividing them is that verse 19 has played an important part in the conversion of many, many people.

From 1927 to 1960 the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (the church I now pastor), was Donald Grey Barnhouse, a gifted Bible teacher whom God used wonderfully in preaching and conference ministries throughout this country and around the world. He dealt with many people's problems in his ministry, and early on he developed what he came to call a series of diagnostic questions to help him analyze where those he was trying to help were coming from spiritually. First, he tried to determine whether or not the individual

involved was a Christian. "Are you born again?" he would ask. If the person gave a clear-cut testimony to his or her faith in Christ, Barnhouse would then go on to deal with the specific problem that had been raised. If not, he would proceed as follows:

"Perhaps I can help clarify your thinking with a question. You know that there are a great many accidents today. Suppose that you and I should go out of this building and a swerving automobile should come up on the sidewalk and kill the two of us. In the next moment we would be what men call 'dead.' We brush aside that absurd folly that we are going to meet St. Peter at the gate of heaven. (That exists only in jokes about two Irishmen.) We are going to meet God. Now suppose that in that moment of ultimate reckoning God should say to you, 'What *right*—note my emphasis on the word *right*—what *right* do you have to come into my heaven?' What would be your answer?"

Barnhouse found, as he used this approach again and again in counseling situations, that only three possible answers can be given to it. That is, all the many varieties of answers ultimately boil down to just three. One of them involves the text I am considering, which is why I tell this story.

"Justified by Good Works"

The first answer people give to the question is a common one. It is that they have done certain good things and therefore want to be accepted by God on the basis of these achievements. Some people have a very high opinion of themselves, of course. They think they have been models of righteous conduct—that they have never done anything bad, only what is good. In fact, they believe they have done a great deal of good! Others know that they have not been consistently good, but they still want God to take note of what good works they have done and accept them into heaven on that basis. Some have kept the Golden Rule, they say—or tried to keep it. Others have tried to help their neighbors, and so on.

If a person replied to Barnhouse's question with any of those claims, he took them to Galatians
2:16b, which says that we "... put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in
Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified." Barnhouse showed that no one can satisfy God's perfect standards by tainted human righteousness.

Then he frequently told the following story. Early in his ministry he knew a man who lived near Tenth Presbyterian Church to whom he would often speak about the gospel. This man usually replied to the preacher's message by laughing patronizingly. He wasn't the kind of person who needed the church or any kind of religion, he would say. He belonged to a lodge, the chief function of which was to do good works. He was active in that lodge and lived up to its high moral principles. If he ever met God, he felt he would be all right on the basis of his lodge associations.

Years went by, during which the man resisted all attempts by Barnhouse to explain the gospel to him.

One day word came that the man was quite ill. He had been stricken with a fatal disease and was not expected to live out the day. Barnhouse went to see him. A member of his lodge was present on what is called "the deathwatch," since no member of the lodge was supposed to be allowed to die alone. This lodge member was seated across the room from the bed on which the other was dying. He was reading a newspaper. As Barnhouse entered, the replacement for this man also entered the room, and the shift was changed. The first man got up and left; the second took his place.

Barnhouse realized that the situation was desperate and decided on a bold course of action. He sat down by the bed and spoke along these lines: "You don't mind my staying here for a few minutes and watching you, do you? I have often wondered what it would be like for a person to die without Jesus Christ. I have known you for quite a few years, and you have always said that you do not need Christ and that your lodge

obligations are enough. I would like to observe a person end his life with those beliefs and see what it is like."

The man on the bed was struck through the heart. He looked at Barnhouse like a wounded animal. "You... wouldn't... mock... a dying man... would you?" he said.

Barnhouse then asked his diagnostic question. "You are going to appear before God in a very short while. Suppose he asks you, 'What right do you have to come into my heaven?' What will you say?"

This time the man looked back in agonized silence, and great tears flowed from his frightened eyes and down his pale, wrinkled cheeks. Then, while he listened attentively, Barnhouse told him how he might approach God through the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. The man replied that his mother had taught him those truths as a child but that he had abandoned them. He had lived without faith. But now, in his final moments on earth, he came back to God through Jesus Christ, confessed his faith in Christ and then had someone call his family members so he might give his newfound testimony to them. He asked Barnhouse to tell his story at his funeral, which took place a few days later.

You must clearly understand this. No one is going to be justified before the bar of God's justice on the basis of his or her good works, however great they may be. Your record will not save you. It is your record that has gotten you into trouble in the first place. Your record will condemn you. The only way anyone will ever be saved is by faith in Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty of our misdeeds for us and, in place of our misdeeds, offers us the gift of his own great righteousness.

"Not a Thing to Say"

The second answer that can be given to Barnhouse's question involves our text in Romans, but it, too, is connected with a story. One summer Barnhouse was crossing the Atlantic by ship, and about the second or third day out, which was a Sunday, he preached for the passengers. This led to several fruitful conversations, one with a young woman who was

a professor of languages at one of the eastern colleges. In the course of their conversation Barnhouse asked his question: "If this ship should suddenly suffer some great catastrophe and sink to the bottom of the sea and we died, and if, when you appeared before God, he should ask you, 'What right do you have to come into my heaven?' what would you say?"

The woman answered, "Why, I wouldn't have a thing to say."

Barnhouse replied, "You are quoting Romans 3:19." She didn't know what he meant, so he opened his Bible and showed the verse to her: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." He explained that she had said it in American idiom: "I wouldn't have a thing to say." God had said, "Every mouth [will] be silenced." But it is the same thing. At God's judgment no one will be able to offer any good works as grounds for his or her justification or proffer any valid excuses for bad conduct. All mouths will be made mute, and everyone will know that he or she is guilty and deserves God's just condemnation.

The reason, of course, is that this is *God's* judgment. The person we must appear before is *God.* We do not have the same experiences when we appear before mere men or answer before a mere earthly tribunal.

Here we have trials by our peers. But our peers are like us. They are also sinful. Frequently juries excuse bad behavior.

Not even judges are always entirely upright in their decisions. In some cases they can be bribed. Or they simply make mistakes.

Moreover, human law is inexact and imperfect. It has loopholes. We can plead extenuating circumstances. And even if we lose our case, we can generally appeal to a higher court and to a court beyond that. If we finally exhaust our legal options and perhaps are sent to prison, we can still carry on our efforts at self-vindication. We can write letters. We can write a book. We can argue. We can refuse to be silenced.

Ah, but before God every mouth will be silenced! Then we will all know that we are not righteous and that there is not a word that can be spoken in our defense.

As evidence for this statement I bring forward the experience of the saints. Surely, if anyone could stand before God and be able to speak in his or her own defense, it would be an upright biblical character. But this is not what we find such people doing. Whenever a biblical "hero" has a glimpse of God's glory, the result is not a loosing of the tongue but a feeling of utter worthlessness before God—and of silence.

Job is an example. Job wanted answers to an important question: Why do the righteous suffer?
His friends had no satisfactory answers, although Job discussed the options with them at length. But when at last God spoke, revealing himself to Job and asking a series of probing questions that go on and on in the book that bears Job's name (chapters 38-41), Job was overcome with confusion and answered:

> "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?
> I put my hand over my mouth.
> I spoke once, but I have no answer— twice, but I
> will say no more."

Job 40:4-5

Job was silenced.

Isaiah had the same experience. When God revealed himself to Isaiah in the great vision recorded in chapter 6 of his prophecy, Isaiah replied, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (v. 5). How interesting that Isaiah's response focused on his lips and the lips of his people! He recognized that anything he might say was unworthy, unclean, sinful. He was silenced. He said no more. It was only after God sent a seraph with a coal from the altar to purge his lips that Isaiah was freed to speak again and obey the command to take God's message to God's people.

When Habakkuk had a revelation of God, he testified:

> *I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound;*
> *Decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.*
>
> *Habakkuk 3:16*

Habakkuk's lips trembled, but no sound came out.
Even John, the beloved disciple of the Lord, when he saw the risen Christ in that awesome vision recorded in the first chapter of Revelation, had no words for him. Instead, he fell at Christ's feet "as though dead" and did not move until Jesus placed his hand upon him and performed something like a physical resurrection (Rev. 1:17).

In his treatment of our text Barnhouse suggests that if there will be any words spoken before the bar of God by those who have rejected the grace of God in this life and are being sent to outer darkness forever, it will be—not excuses—but a resentful acknowledgment of the truth of God and the justice of their own condemnation.

They will cry, "It was all true, God. I was wrong. I knew I was wrong when I made my excuses. But I hated and still hate the principle of righteousness by the blood of Christ. I must admit that those despised Christians were right who bowed before you and acknowledged their dependence on you. I hated their songs of faith then, and I hate them now. They were right, and I hated them because they were right and because they belonged to you. I wanted my own way. I still want my own way. I want heaven, but I want heaven without you. I want heaven with myself on the throne. That is what I want, and I do not want anything else and never, never will want anything other than heaven with myself on the throne. I want my own way. And now I am going to the place of desire without fulfillment, of lust without satisfaction, or wanting without having, of wishing but never getting, of looking but never seeing, and I hate, I hate, I hate, because I want my own way. I hate you for not letting me have my way. I hate, I hate...."

Their voices will drift off into outer nothingness, and there will be silence at last.

The Only Saving Answer

It is clear from what I have been saying that the only *saving* answer to the question being posed—"What right do you have to come into God's heaven?"—focuses not on the works of the sinner, but on the achievements of Jesus Christ. If we are to be saved, it will not be on the basis of anything we have ever done or can do, but solely on the basis of what he has done for us. Christ died for us. He suffered in our place. He bore the punishment of our sins. All who come to God on that basis and with that answer will be saved. No others will be. Only those who come to God trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ will enter heaven.

Some years ago there was an Arthur Murray dance instructor who had been out late on a Saturday evening. In the wee hours of the morning he staggered back to his hotel room, fell into bed, and went to sleep. The next morning he was suddenly jolted awake by his clock radio. A man was speaking, and he was asking this question: "If in the next few moments some great disaster should happen and you should be killed and if you should find yourself before God and he should ask you, 'What right do you have to come into my heaven?' what would you say?"

The dance instructor was amazed and confounded by this question. He had never heard a question like that before. He realized that he did not have an answer. He had not a single thing to say. His mouth, filled with empty words just hours before, was suddenly stopped. He sat silently on the edge of his bed while Barnhouse—he was the preacher on that radio program—explained the answer to him.

That dance instructor was D. James Kennedy, now pastor of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and author of the popular witnessing and evangelism program known as "Evangelism Explosion." Kennedy believed on Jesus Christ that day in his hotel room, and the question that had been used to save him became the chief tool in his evangelism strategy. Since that day many thousands of people have come to Christ through his program.

What Is *Your* Answer?

I end by asking that same question of you. Someday you will die. You will face God, and he will say to you, "What right do you have to come into my heaven?" What will your response be?

Perhaps you will say, "Well, here is my record. I know that I have done some bad things, but I have done a lot of good things, too. I want you to look at these and see if they are not enough for me to have deserved heaven. Add it up. All I want from you is justice." If you say that, justice is exactly what you will get. You will be judged for your sin and be condemned. Your good works, however fine they may seem in your sight or even in the sight of other people, will not save you. For, as we have seen, God has said:

> *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
> *All have turned away, they have together become worthless;*
> *there is no one who does good, not even one."*

No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the law of good works, for it is by the law that "we become conscious of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

Perhaps you will not plead your good works, but instead will stand before God silenced. This is better. At least you will have recognized that your goodness is not adequate before God. You will know you are a sinner. But it is still a most pitiful position to be in: silent before the one great Judge of the universe, with no possibility of making a defense, no possibility of urging extenuating circumstances, no hope of escaping condemnation.

So what will you say? I trust you will be able to answer—I hope this study had helped you to the point of being able to answer, if you have not come to it already—"My right to heaven is the Lord Jesus Christ. He died for me. He took the punishment for my sin. He is my right to heaven, because he has become my righteousness."

Chapter 39.
None Justified by Good Works

Romans 3:20

In the New International Version of Romans, the word *therefore* has already occurred two times: once in Romans 1:24, where Paul speaks of God's having given mankind up to its wickedness ("Therefore God gave them over..."), and once in Romans 2:1, where he speaks to the morally sensitive but unbelieving person ("You, therefore, have no excuse..."). However, in the Greek manuscripts, the proper and strongest word for "therefore" (*dioti*) occurs for the first time in Romans 3:20, which is our text. *Dioti* literally means "on account of which thing" (*dia ho ti*). So it is appropriate that it is found here, where it marks a conclusion based on all that has been said in the first major section of Paul's letter. From Romans 1:18, where the argument began, and up to this point, Paul has been proving that the entire race lies under the just condemnation of God for its wickedness. His argument is an all-embracing negative, which precedes the even greater positive statements of Romans 3:21 and what is to follow. How is this great argument summarized? Quite simply. Paul says that no one will be saved by good works: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

But why? Why is it that no one will be saved by good works? If not the utterly immoral person, why not at least the virtuous pagan or the religious Jew? Why not you? Why not me? Paul's answer takes us back over the chief points of the preceding chapters.

Wrath: The Rejection of God

The first plank in Paul's argument is one we have already looked at several times in various forms. It is that, far from pursuing God and trying to please him (which is what most of us mistakenly think we are doing), the entire race is actually trying to get away from God and is resisting him as intensely and thoroughly as possible. You remember

from our previous studies how Paul says that we "suppress" the truth about God, much of which is revealed even in nature, not to mention the written revelation of God, which is the Bible. But because we do not want to serve a deity who is like the One we know is there—the God who is sovereign over his creation, altogether holy, omniscient, and immutable—we suppress the truth about this true God and try to construct substitute gods to take his place. And, says Paul, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all [this] godlessness and wickedness" of mankind (Rom. 1:18).

"But what about the good things human beings do?" asks someone. "You can't deny that people are often kind and helpful to one another or go out of their way for others. Don't these things count for anything?"

Let me answer this question by an illustration from a book by Robert M. Horn, a staff member of British InterVarsity (the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship). It is entitled *Go Free!*
The Meaning of Justification, and the illustration is borrowed in turn from a book by Loraine
Boettner (*The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination),* who borrowed it from W. D. Smith (*What Is Calvinism?*). These writers imagine a sailing ship manned by a crew of pirates. The pirates are on good terms with one another. They work hard at their jobs, are honest among themselves (according to a certain "pirate code"), help one another, and even defend one another. Their hard work really is hard work. Their kindness to each other really is kindness. But all these "good" actions are also and at the same time "bad" or wrong behavior, because they are aimed at maintaining themselves in violation of international maritime law. Their good deeds are highly selective; they do not help everyone, only themselves or those like themselves. They actually rob, maim, and murder many other people. And even their kindnesses to each other grow out of their rebellion, expressing and actually reinforcing it.

Here is a more modern example. Some years ago Mario Puzo wrote a book called *The*

Godfather, which later became a movie, and a sequel to the movie. The book was a study of the so-called Mafia, the powerful crime families who control much of the illegal gambling, prostitution, drug dealing, and other criminal activity in America and other parts of the world. This book and the films based on it showed the tremendous violence exerted by these crime families to achieve their goals. But what made the violence particularly shocking is that it seemed to exist alongside tender and otherwise noble feelings and actions of these figures. Mafia dons are often quite kindly family men. They love their wives and children. They are loyal to each other. They defend each other. In fact, they are ruthless in righting a wrong done to a member of their own crime family. Ah, but they are still crime-oriented, and the structure and ethical code of the family is created only to enhance their own well-being in violation of the law and at the expense of other people.

That parallels our situation in respect to mankind's universal rebellion against God. We may do good things (at least "good" as they appear to us), but our good is actually bad, because it is designed to maintain our rebellion against the only sovereign God and his laws.

No Excuse: God's Law Broken

The second reason why no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law is that no one actually does observe it. This is the explanation of the apparent contradiction between Romans 2:13, which says that "it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous," and Romans 3:20, which says that "no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law." Both are true because, although anyone who perfectly obeys the law would be declared righteous—the righteousness of God requires it—in point of fact no one actually does this; rather, all disobey God's law.

At this point Paul speaks in almost identical terms to both the Jew, who actually possessed the revealed law of God, and to the Gentile, who did not possess it. To the Jew he says, "You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who

brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'" (Rom. 2:21b-24). The point of these statements is that the laws these religious people broke are in their Scriptures. In fact, they are from the very heart of the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is the Ten
Commandments that say, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3), "You shall not commit adultery" (v. 14), and "You shall not steal" (v. 15). These were laws of which the Jews were most proud. But they had broken them, as indeed all human beings have.

It is exactly the same idea in the case of the Gentile. The Gentile of Paul's day, the Greek or Roman of the first century, did not have the Old Testament law for the most part (though some did). But Gentiles had a code of ethics of their own. They knew that they should do good. They knew that they should seek the prosperity of other human beings. They knew that stealing and all other harmful practices were wrong. But they did bad things all the same, just as we do! Paul tells the Gentile, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (Rom. 2:1).

This means that whenever we are offended at another person's actions, as we frequently are, we condemn ourselves before God. For what we find blameworthy in another, we also do. Is a person rude to you and are you offended? If so, your reaction condemns you, since you are often rude to other people. Are you angry when someone takes unfair advantage of you? You are right to be angry; a violation of fairness is wrong. But you still condemn yourself, because you are also unfair to others. You may not always admit it, but it is true. Whatever standard you raise by which you approve one set of actions and disapprove another set of actions in others—that very standard condemns you, because you cannot and do not live up to it.

So the second reason why no one will be declared righteous by observing the law is that no one actually does observe it. We fail to

observe even the tiniest part, and we certainly do not observe the whole!

The Actual Case: Great Wickedness

The third reason why no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law is that, far from observing the law (or even trying to observe the law), we are all actually violating the law in every conceivable way and on every possible occasion and are therefore actively, consistently, thoroughly, and intentionally wicked.

This is the meaning of the two long lists of descriptive vices found in Romans 1:29-31 and Romans 3:10-18. Apart from these lists, a person might reluctantly admit that at least at times he or she breaks even the lowest possible standard for decent behavior and might say, "I do not pretend to be able to do even a single right thing all the time or in every possible situation." But that is a far cry from admitting that one is thoroughly wicked in God's sight. And as long as a person is unwilling to admit that, there is always the feeling that somehow (regardless of the person's admitted shortcomings) the good that a person does will be acknowledged by God, and justification by good works will at least become possible.

But look at how God sees human beings: "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom. 1:29-31). It is from this viewpoint that Paul declares:

As it is written:

> *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
> *All have turned away, they have together become worthless;*
> *there is no one who does good, not even one."*
> *"Their throats are open graves;*

their tongues practice deceit."
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."
"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."
"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,
and the way of peace they do not know."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Romans 3:10-18

These verses do not mean that every human being has done every bad thing possible, but they do mean that the human race is like this. We are members of that human race, and, if the truth be told, the potential for every possible human vice is in everyone. We may not get a chance to murder someone. We may not even be tempted to do so. But given due provocation, right circumstances, and the removal of the societal restraints provided to limit murderous acts, we are all capable of murder and will murder, just as others have. So also with God's other commandments.

It is because of this inward potential that Scripture says, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5).

Circumcision: No Substitutes

The fourth reason why no one will be declared righteous before God by observing the law is that God is concerned with true or actual observance—that is, with the attitudes and actions of the heart—and not with any outward acts that appear pious but actually mean nothing.

The chief example of this wrongheaded attempt at justification is the faith that certain people have placed in circumcision. This was not a case of simple pagan superstition or of the mere traditions of the elders, because the rite of circumcision was prescribed for Israel by God in the Old Testament. It was a rite given to Abraham, who was to circumcise

all the males in his household and pass on this rite to those who were their descendants (Gen. 17:9-14).
Circumcision was to be a mark of membership in the special chosen family of God's people. This was such an important requirement that later in Jewish history we find a scene in which God was displeased with Moses and was about to kill him, evidently because he had neglected to circumcise his own son. He was saved only when Zipporah, his wife, performed the rite for him (Exod. 4:24-26).

Circumcision is neither extra-biblical nor unimportant. It was an important rite, just as baptism, the observance of the Lord's Supper, church membership, and similar religious practices are important today. But the error of the Jew (and the error of many contemporary Christians) is in thinking that a person can be declared righteous before God by these things. That is not possible. Sacraments do have value once one is justified; that is, they are valuable signs of something that has occurred internally (if it has occurred internally), and they are meant to remind us of that experience and strengthen it. But no one can be saved by circumcision or by any other external religious act.

Paul writes, "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.... A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Rom. 2:25, 28-29a).

"But circumcision is commanded in the law!" says the Jew.

True, but not as a means by which a man or a woman can be justified.

"But aren't we commanded to be baptized?" asks the Christian.

Yes, but as an outward sign of a prior, inward faith. It is not baptism that saves us, but God who works in us inwardly.

"But aren't we told to observe the Lord's Supper?" the believer wonders.

Yes, if we have been justified by faith in him whose death the communion service signifies. But to eat the bread, which signifies the Lord's broken body, and drink the wine, which signifies the Lord's shed blood, without faith in him is to eat and drink condemnation to oneself (1 Cor. 11:29).

God is not taken in by mere externals. There are no substitutes for faith.

The Law's Good Function

I come back to our text, which says that "no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." We have been looking at the first part of this sentence, the negative, and we have gone back over the opening section of Romans to see why this great negative is true.

Yet this is only one part of the sentence. The first part of the sentence makes this definite negative statement, declaring that no one will be declared righteous by observing God's law. It tells us what the law cannot do. By contrast, the second half of the sentence contains a great positive statement, telling us that, although the law is unable to justify anybody, all of us being sinners, it is nevertheless able to show where we fall short of God's standards and thus point us to the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom alone God provides salvation.

J. B. Phillips is an Englishman who has written a very lively paraphrase of the New Testament, called *The New Testament in Modern English.* Because he is an Englishman and not an American, Phillips has occasionally used British terms for concepts that would be described in an entirely different way by Americans. Therefore, for Americans at least, Phillips throws new light on key passages. This is true of Romans 3:20. In England what we call a ruler or yardstick is called a straightedge. So when Phillips came to this verse and wanted to show what the law does for us (even though the law is not a means by which we can be justified), he paraphrased the text by writing, "'No man can justify himself before God' by a perfect performance of the Law's

demands—indeed it is the straightedge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are."

Apart from God's law we may consider ourselves to be quite upright, model citizens who are fit candidates for heaven. But when we look into the law closely we soon see that we are not fit candidates at all. We are not upright. We are morally crooked. And we discover that if we are to become acceptable to the only upright, holy God, we must be changed by him.

One commentator has compared the law of God to a mirror. What happens when you look into a mirror? You see yourself, don't you? And what happens if your face is dirty and you look into a mirror? The answer is that you see that you should wash your dirty face. Does the mirror clean your face? No. The mirror's function is to drive you to the soap and water that will clean you up.

With that analogy in mind, let me give you a verse written by Robert Herrick, an English poet who lived about the time of William Shakespeare. It uses an image drawn from classical mythology in which the great Greek hero Hercules was sent to perform what was thought to be an impossible task: to clean up the immense, filthy stables of King Augeas. Comparing his heart to those stables, Herrick wrote:

Lord, I confess that thou alone art able To purify this Augean stable.
Be the seas water and the lands all soap,
Yet if thy blood not wash me, there's no hope.

That is it exactly. If you are placing your hope in your supposed ability to keep God's law or even just in your ability to do certain good things, your case is most hopeless. Your heart needs cleansing, and no effort of your own can ever cleanse it.

Where will you find cleansing? You will find it only in Christ, to whom the law drives you. William Cowper, an eighteenth-century poet, found cleansing there and wrote:

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;

And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, as vile as he, Washed all my sins away.

I trust you also have found cleansing where Robert Herrick, William Cowper, and so many others have found it. The apostle Peter declared, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Part Four.

God's Remedy in Christ

Chapter 40.

But Now...

Romans 3:21

For two and a half chapters of Romans (and thirty-nine of these studies), we have been looking at the sad story of the ruin of the race because of sin. Now we reach a new and glorious point in Paul's letter. Instead of reviewing the grim story of sin and God's wrath, we turn with relief to the wonderful news of God's great grace to sinners through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understanding the Bible depends in no small measure on understanding the Bible's main words—words like *justification, redemption, faith, substitution, obedience*, *grace,* and many others. No one can claim really to understand the Bible unless he or she knows something about the meaning of these terms. But it is also the case that understanding the Bible sometimes depends on what we might be inclined to think of as less important words. I think of the "so" in John 3:16, for instance: "For God *so* loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...." What does "so" mean? To ask that question and answer it, we must go deeper into the meaning of this most popular verse than we might at first have thought possible.

We come to two such words at the beginning of Romans 3:21: "But now"!

What tremendous words they are! One expositor calls them "the great turning point" in God's dealings with the human race, and a turning point in the letter. Another calls them "God's great 'nevertheless' in the face of man's failure." If we had not studied the first two and a half chapters of Romans carefully, we would not be in a position to appreciate these words, because the change they speak of would not

seem to be a change at all. With no understanding of the past, we can never appreciate the present.

But now we can! We have studied the past. Therefore these two words become for us a cry of great joy and a paean of victory.

The Turning Point

Where should we begin? The obvious place is with the word *now,* which indicates that there has been a change in time or in history. Before, something bad had existed. *Now* that has changed.

The contrast between "then" and "now" is a very great one for Paul, as a careful study of his writings shows. The reason is plain. The change between a past sad state of affairs and a glorious present state is one that Paul had himself experienced. It occurred on the Damascus road. Before that event, Paul had been an enemy of Jesus Christ and of his followers. He had been trying to get rid of them, and he thought he was doing right, as fanatics generally do. But the future apostle was actually in great darkness, ignorant of God and opposed to him. It was on the road to Damascus that Jesus appeared to Paul, revealing himself as the Son of God, the one whom Paul was persecuting. In that moment the scales fell from Paul's eyes, the truth of heaven broke in upon his darkened heart, flooding it with new light, and he turned from his old life of pride, prejudice, and persecution to a new life of serving Christ and his gospel. Like the blind man who had been healed by Jesus, Paul could now say, "One thing I know. I was blind *but now* I see!" (cf. John 9:25).

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul puts this change in theological language but with precisely this emphasis: "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. *But* whatever was to my profit I *now* consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more I

consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord..." (Phil. 3:4-8, italics mine).

Meeting Jesus on the way to Damascus, in the midst of his campaign to arrest and kill Christians, made all the difference between life and death for the apostle.

From Wrath to Righteousness

Yet, in the context of his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of this great temporal or historical change not so much as something that occurred to him personally but as something that God had done to provide for the salvation of the race. If God had not done this, our present condition and future prospects would be bleak. They would be only what we have already found in Romans 1:18 through 3:20. We would be under wrath, in spiritual and moral decline, and without any possibility of helping or saving ourselves by human righteousness. We would be, as Paul said of the Ephesians in their unregenerate state, "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12b). *But now* things are different. There is hope because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have changed everything.

What specifically has changed? Paul's use of "now" in this and other texts suggests changes in the following areas:

1. *Wrath and righteousness.* The first change is the one most obvious from our text. When Paul says, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known," it is clear that he is contrasting this with the earlier declaration: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men..." (Rom. 1:18). Before, the wrath of God was being revealed against us. *Now* the righteousness of God is made known.

Several weeks before writing this sermon, I was preaching to a gathering of missionaries in southern France, and one of my messages was on Genesis 3, the story of the fall of our first parents. I said in the

course of that message that when God clothed Adam and Eve with the skins of animals, this was a picture (which they no doubt clearly understood) of the way in which God would one day clothe with Christ's righteousness all who would believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. When I finished, an older missionary expressed appreciation for the emphasis on being clothed with Christ's righteousness, saying, "We don't hear that often enough; it is an important teaching."

I agreed that it was certainly an important teaching. But there is a sense in which teaching about the wrath of God is almost as important. If we do not understand that apart from Jesus Christ we are under God's wrath and destined for an eternity of judgment, we can hardly appreciate the greatness of what God has done for us in providing salvation through Christ's atonement.

People in our day generally think that they are on great terms with God or that, if they are not, it is only because God is a bit out of sorts and peevish—though he will probably get over it. That is not the case at all. On the contrary, the case is as Paul presents it in the first chapter of Romans.

We have rejected God, suppressing the truth about him in spite of the fact that God has revealed it to us; as a result, God is already in the process of unleashing his wrath. He has given us up to the consequences of our sin. In Romans 1:29-31, Paul describes the end of this abandonment. There is "every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity." He says that people are "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless." These things are an expression of what happens to the human race when God displays his wrath by abandoning us to our own evil devices.

How are we to escape from such captivity? In ourselves we cannot. *"But now,"* says Paul, in place of wrath "a righteousness from God has been made known." This is the one single way of salvation from the

wrath to which our sin has subjected us. But thank God there is this one way.

2. *Condemnation and justification.* The second change is from condemnation to justification. This is evident from the continuation of Romans 3, where Paul writes, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace..." (vv. 22b-24). Yet it is not only here that we see this truth; nor do these verses necessarily present it in the strongest language. Think rather of Romans 8:1: "Therefore, there is *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," and Romans 5:9, which declares, "Since we have *now* been justified by his blood...."

Most people do not think of themselves as being under condemnation, obviously because the sentence hanging over them has not yet been fully executed. They are alive and well. They expect to remain so. Nevertheless, they are still under condemnation and will perish eventually. Jesus said this clearly: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:17-19). These words are a close parallel to what Paul says about human beings suppressing the truth about God in their wickedness. They are already under wrath.

But now, because of Christ's work, there can be justification rather than condemnation. There is justification "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

3. *Bondage and freedom.* Sin does not only bring us under God's just wrath and condemnation. It also enslaves us so that we cannot live truly good lives. Yet things can be different. In Romans 7:6 Paul uses those two important words again: "*But now,* by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we

serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (italics mine). This is a very important matter, which we will look into in detail later in these studies. But the chief point is that, although apart from Christ we are under law but unable to keep it since we are bound by sin, being united to Christ by the Holy Spirit delivers us from bondage and enables us to live holy lives.

Paul says this earlier when he writes, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life" (Rom. 6:22).

4. *Exclusion and participation.* The final contrast is one Gentiles should particularly appreciate. Paul expresses it best in writing to the Ephesians, saying, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13).

Paul never forgot that—although Jews need Christ just as much as Gentiles need him, for no one, either Jew or Gentile, can be saved apart from faith in Jesus—the Jews of his day nevertheless had great spiritual advantages that non-Jews did not possess. They had "the adoption as sons... the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises," as Paul observes in Romans 9:4. Gentiles were cut off from these things. Nevertheless, those who had been excluded from this earthly citizenship had *now* come together with believing Jews into a new relationship. "Consequently," Paul says, "you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19).

A New But Ancient Gospel

I have been claiming that the words "but now" indicate that something new has come into the world in terms of a believing person's relationship to God. Yet I need to say also that, although this is true in one sense—something new actually happened in history through the work of Christ—there is another sense in which this is not "new" at all, but is rather only an expression of the same plan through which God

had been saving people since the beginning of the world. It is new in a historical sense, but as the way of salvation it has always existed in the mind of God. Paul says this explicitly in 2 Timothy 1:9b-10, where he writes, "This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior...."

Paul makes this same point in Romans 3:21 by saying that this "righteousness from God" is something "to which the Law and the Prophets testify." This refers to the Old Testament, of course. So we ask: Where and in what ways does the Old Testament testify to the grace that has come into the world through Jesus Christ?

It is not hard to answer that question. We think back to the earliest part of the Old Testament, which records how God came to Adam and Eve after their rebellion in eating of the forbidden tree. God pronounced a judgment on them, cursing the serpent who had brought the temptation and punishing Adam and Eve for yielding to it. But then, in the middle of these stern and frightening words, God said, speaking to the serpent: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

This speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ, who would be wounded by Satan. Although Satan would strike his heel, Christ would crush Satan's head, destroying Satan and his works forever. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Adam and Eve believed this prophecy and were saved by looking forward in faith to this mighty one who was to come, just as we are saved by looking back to him by the same faith.

Further on in Genesis, we see God telling Abraham more about this redeemer. From the beginning he had said to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3b). But as the story unfolds we see God adding more to that initial cryptic revelation, until finally, in that magnificent account of the test by which Abraham was commanded to offer Isaac, his only son, on Mount Moriah, we learn that it was not through Abraham himself that the nations were to be

blessed but through his "offspring" (Gen. 22:18). Paul would later point out that this word is singular, indicating not the whole of the descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel, but that one special descendant who would redeem the race by dying for it (cf. Gal. 3:8, 15-16). The near sacrifice of Isaac was a striking picture of how God would one day give his only Son for us on that identical mountain.

The ceremonial law of Israel points to Jesus Christ, for he is the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. He fulfilled the meaning of the sacrifices. More than that, each item of the temple furnishings and each detail of the rites of Israel's worship point to him.

In the psalms we have many great words about Jesus.

Psalm 16:10 prophesies the Lord's resurrection: "You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." It was quoted by Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:27) and by Paul before the Gentiles at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:35).

Psalm 22 describes the crucifixion. The Lord quoted the opening lines of this prophecy while hanging on the cross (see Matt. 27:46 and parallels).

Psalm 23 portrays Jesus as the Good Shepherd, a theme that the Lord expounded, as recorded in John 10.

Psalm 24 describes Jesus' glorious ascension into heaven.

And what of the Old Testament prophets? The many specific references to Jesus in the prophetic books are too numerous to list. But we cannot overlook the great Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah, particularly this one:

> *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.*
> *Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:3-6

These prophecies of the salvation that was to come through Jesus Christ can be multiplied hundreds if not thousands of times throughout the Old Testament.

Saying Those Words

The important thing, however, is not so much whether you understand or even know of these Old Testament prophecies, but whether the change they speak about is a reality for you. You may not know much theology. Terms like "justification," "propitiation," and "redemption" may be only vague generalities for you. But you know what your past life has been. You remember your past sins. You are aware of your failures. Is that truly a former, past state for you? Can you say, "That was true of me once. I really was like the person described in the first two and a half chapters of Romans. But that was before. Now Christ has come. He has saved me, and I have become an entirely new creature because of him"?

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests that this is one way by which you can test whether or not you are a true Christian, and by which you can reassure and strengthen yourself if you are:

When the devil attacks you and suggests to you that you are not a Christian and that you have never been a Christian because of what is still in your heart or because of what you are still doing or because of something you once did—when he comes and thus accuses you, what do you say to him? Do you agree with him? Or do you say to him: "Yes, that was true, but now..."? Do you hold up these words against him? Or when, perhaps, you feel condemned as you read the Scripture, as you read the Law in the Old Testament, as you read the Sermon on the Mount, and as you feel that you are undone, do you remain lying on the ground in hopelessness, or do you lift up your head and say, "But now"? This is the essence of the Christian position; this is how faith answers the accusations of the Law, the accusations of conscience and everything else that would condemn and depress us. These are indeed very wonderful words, and it is most important that we should lay hold of them and realize their tremendous importance and their real significance.

Can you say those words? You can, if you trust in Jesus and his death on your behalf.

Can you say:

"Once I was blind, *but now* I see"?

"Once I was lost, *but now* I am found"?

"Once I was subject to the just wrath of God. *But now* I have been saved by Jesus, having received the gift of God's righteousness through faith in him"?

Chapter 41.
Righteousness Apart from Law

Romans 3:21-24

In Romans 3:21-31 we are dealing with themes that are the very heart, not only of Paul's letter, but of the entire Bible and therefore of reality

itself. In all life and history there is nothing more important than these teachings. But who today thinks this way? Who is willing to acknowledge this in an age when abstract thought—indeed, even thinking itself—is suspect? Who even among the masses of Christian people really appreciates what Paul is saying here? Ours is an age in which people are self-absorbed and focus on immediate gratification. We tend to evaluate any religious teaching according to its apparent relevance to our present "needs" and short-term goals.

No one can have success teaching basic truths about man and the universe unless our closed ways of thinking are changed. But, then, this has always been the case. It was no easier for the apostle Paul to preach the message of salvation to a generation that was busy entertaining itself by sex and circuses than for today's Christians to minister that same word to an age that has anesthetized itself through television.

But we must try! We must try as Paul did! We must teach the Word of God, because it is by the Word alone that God speaks to us about what really matters.

Four Great Doctrines

We have already seen how Paul introduces this section of his letter—with the words "but now." These words indicate that something of great importance has taken place, and that this is the substance of the good news being proclaimed by Paul and the other messengers of the gospel. Here is a simple outline of this teaching:

1. *God has provided a righteousness of his own for men and women, a righteousness we do not possess ourselves.* This is the very heart or theme of the Word of God. Although it is new in its fulfillment, it had nevertheless been fully prophesied in the Old Testament.
2. *This righteousness is by grace.* We do not deserve it. In fact, we are incapable ever of deserving it.
3. *It is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in dying for his people, redeeming them from their sin, that has made this grace on God's*

part possible. This is the reason for the "now" in "but now." It is because of Jesus' death that there is a Christian gospel.

4. *This righteousness that God has graciously provided becomes ours through simple faith.* Believing and trusting God in regard to the work of Jesus is the only way anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, can be saved.

The importance of these teachings will become increasingly clear in our exposition of them. But we can see their importance even at this point by noticing that they are a nearly exact repetition of what Paul has already stated as the thesis of the letter. They were stated in his opening address, for example: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 1:1-5). The teachings of Romans 3:21-31 are all there. It is the same gospel.

Again, it is also what we have found in the initial statement of Paul's diesis in Romans 1:16-17: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

So I repeat what I said at the beginning of this study: *There is nothing in all life and history that is more important than these teachings.* The issues of eternity hang on these truths, and we must be faithful to them regardless of the resistance or scorn of our contemporaries.

Objective and Subjective Genitives

We begin with the first of these four doctrines, namely, that "God has provided a righteousness of his own for men and women." You will notice, if you read the text carefully, that in Romans 3:21 the New International Version speaks of "a righteousness *from* God," while I have implied (echoing the King James Version) that this is the "righteousness *of God,"* that is, suggesting that it is God's own righteousness. Which is correct? Is this a righteousness from God? Or is it the righteousness of God? And is there a difference?

The variations in translations stem from the fact that the Greek text contains a simple genitive construction, which we usually translate in English by using the word "of." But in Greek, as in English, this can be either what grammarians call a subjective genitive or an objective genitive.
A subjective genitive is one in which the word following "of is the subject or source of the idea. An example is "love of God." The phrase usually means that this is God's love. He is the source of the love and the subject of the action. A nonbiblical example is the "novels of Charles
Dickens." It means that Dickens is the author of the novels. He wrote them. It does not mean that they are about him. The other type of genitive is what grammarians call an objective genitive. It refers to a situation in which the word following "of is the object of the first word. An example might be "world of misery." This does not mean that misery is the source of the world or even the source of the world's problems but rather that the world is characterized by misery. It is a miserable world. The word *misery* functions as an adjective in this construction.

How, then, is the phrase "righteousness of God" to be interpreted? If this is a case of an objective genitive, it is a righteousness determined by God's own nature. That is, as we can also say, it is his righteousness or divine righteousness. This is what the editors of the Scofield Bible seem to have thought, for they appended a note to Romans 3:21, which reads: "The righteousness of God is all that God demands and approves, and is ultimately found in Christ himself, who fully met in our stead

every requirement of the law." They support this interpretation by a reference to 1 Corinthians 1:30: "Christ... has become... our righteousness."

I find support for this idea in the text, because Paul's chief point is that the righteousness of God *has been disclosed* in the person and work of Christ. Before, we did not have any truly adequate way of understanding what this righteousness is like. But now we do, since we can see it in the Savior.

On the other hand, if this is a subjective genitive (rather than an objective genitive), we should then understand Paul to be teaching that God is the source of this righteousness and that it is in Jesus Christ that God *makes it available to us.* The translators of the New International Version seem to have preferred this idea, for they have written: "But now a righteousness *from* God... has been made known."

Surely this is a case where we do not have to choose between the two ideas, for both are correct. Righteousness *is* to be seen in the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is also *his* righteousness, rather than our own, that we need. Apart from him we might compare ourselves only with one another and thus have an utterly inadequate idea of what the holy God requires. This is what Paul himself had been doing prior to his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. He had compared himself with other people, even the most moral people of his day, and had concluded that there was much he could boast about: "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more" (Phil. 3:4). But when he saw Jesus in the Damascus road vision, for the first time he came to understand what true righteousness is and learned to reckon his own good deeds as worthless. "For [his] sake," wrote Paul, "I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (vv. 8b-9).

At the same time—it is explicitly stated in the last of those three verses from Philippians—the righteousness *of* God, which is revealed in

Christ, is also a righteousness that comes to us *from* God. For if God did not give it, there is no way any of us could possibly win it for ourselves. This is another way of saying that salvation is a gift. It is the ground on which the redeemed will ascribe *all* their praise to God for saving them.

Apart from the Law

These ideas need to be held together. And they need to be remembered in everything we say both about our inability to attain righteousness by ourselves and about the way God has provided it for us through the work of Jesus Christ.

The phrase Paul uses in our text to state how the righteousness of God can *not* come to us is "apart from law." This does not mean that the law has no value, of course. The very sentence reminds us of one of its values, for it says that "the Law and the Prophets" testified to the righteousness that would come (and eventually did come) in Jesus Christ. (In our last study we looked at some of the texts that do just that.) Again, at the very end of Romans 3, we find Paul returning to the subject of the law, saying, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (v. 31). The law clearly had value in the Old Testament period and continues to have value in the Christian era.

Theologians usually speak of the function of God's law in two areas: (1) to restrain evil, much as secular law is meant to do; and (2) to reveal man's sin and thus point us to the need for Jesus Christ. These are important functions. But the one thing the law cannot do and was never meant to do was save a person by his or her observance of it.

This is why Paul speaks of a righteousness of God "apart from law" and why this announcement is such good news, although hard for unsaved people to understand or accept. The law, as Paul will say later in Romans, is "holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). If we could be saved by law, the law of God would save us. But we cannot! And it cannot! We cannot keep God's commandments. If the law is to have any benefit for us, it must be by enabling us to see our inability to satisfy the

standards of God by our own efforts and thus turn us to Christ. That is why Paul says that "this righteousness from God comes [not by law but] through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe..." (Rom. 3:22).

Another way of putting this is to say that when the law was given to Israel on Mount Sinai, the very books that listed these unyielding commandments of the holy God also contained instructions for the sacrifice of the lamb on the Day of Atonement. God gave the commandments, but he also gave the altar and taught the principle of substitution. It is as if he were saying, "These are my commandments; you must keep them or be lost. But I know you cannot keep them. So, rather than trusting in your ability to do what you never will be able to do, I point you to my Son, who will die for you. It is on the basis of his future work that I am giving you a righteousness you could never achieve yourselves. Trust him."

A Unique Religion

This idea is so important that I want to state it another way, showing the utter uniqueness of Christianity in this fundamental matter. Paul has said that this righteousness from God, which we need, is "apart from law," by which he means primarily "apart from the law of God given to Israel." He means, as John Murray has said in his commentary, that "in justification there is no contribution, preparatory, accessory or subsidiary, that is given by works of law."

But "law" also embraces all human effort to attain righteousness, and this means that the fundamental principle of this verse (as well as of the Bible as a whole) is that God's righteousness is to be received apart from any human doing whatsoever.

This is the point at which Christianity is distinguished categorically from every other human religion. All religions have their distinguishing points, of course. Some call God, the Supreme Being, by a different name. Some emphasize one path to God, some another. Some are mystical, some very ritualistic. But all, except for Christianity, suppose that there is something human beings can do for the Deity to convince

him to save them. They teach a human way to achieve eternity, a man-made ladder to the bliss of the life to come. Only Christianity humbles man by insisting that there is nothing at all we can do to work out our salvation.

Of course, once we are saved we have the obligation and privilege of doing much, since Jesus calls us to discipleship. But we are not saved by such doings. All our actions can bring upon us, even the best of our actions, is the judgment from God that we deserve. Therefore, it is vitally important to examine ourselves to see if we are really trusting in Jesus and what he has done, or whether we are trusting in what we suppose we can do. Commentator Donald Barnhouse has written:

Look into your own heart and see whether you are trusting, even in a small fraction, in something that you are doing for yourself or that you are doing for God, instead of finding in your heart that you have ceased from your works as God did from his and that you are resting on the work that was accomplished on the cross of Calvary. This is the secret of reality:

Righteousness apart from law. Righteousness apart from human doing. Christianity is the faith that believes God's Word about the work that is fully done, completely done....

Righteousness without law. Righteousness apart from human character. Righteousness without even a consideration of the nature of the being that is made righteous. Righteousness that comes from God upon an ungodly man. Righteousness that will save a thief on the cross. Righteousness that is prepared for you. Righteousness that you must choose by abandoning any hope of salvation from anything that is in yourself. And underline this—it is the only righteousness that can produce practical righteousness in you.

The *Really* Good News

When a person is first presented with this pure core of Christianity, the reaction is usually revulsion. We want to save ourselves, and anything that suggests that we cannot do so is abhorrent to us. We do not want a

religion that demands that we throw ourselves entirely upon the grace and mercy of God. But Christianity is not only the religion we *need* so desperately. It is also the only religion *worth having* in the long run. Let me explain.

1. *If salvation is by the gift of God, apart from human doing, then we can be saved now.* We do not have to wait until we reach some high level of attainment or pass some undetermined future test. Many people think in these terms, because they know (if they are honest with themselves) that their lives and actions are far from what they should be now and they keep striving. But this means—I am sure you can see it—that salvation can never be a present experience but is something always in the future. It is something such persons hope to attain, though they are afraid they may not. It is only in Christianity that this future element moves into the present. And the reason it can is that salvation is not based on our ability to accumulate acceptable merits with God, but rather on what God has *already* done for us. When Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished," he meant what he said. His finished work is the sole grounds for our being declared righteous by God. And since it is a past accomplishment, salvation can be ours now, solely by the application of Christ's righteousness to us as God's gift.

This is why Paul can say, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). It is also why he declared, "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

It is why Joseph Hart, one of our great hymnwriters, wrote:

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Bruised and broken by the Fall; If you tarry till you're better, You will never come at all:
Not the righteous, not the righteous, Sinners Jesus came to call.

Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream; All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel your need of him:
This he gives you; this he gives you; 'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.

2. *If salvation is by the gift of God, apart from human doing, then salvation is certain.* If salvation is by human works, then human works (or a lack of them) can undo it. If I can save myself, I can unsave myself. I can ruin everything. But if salvation is of God from beginning to end, it is sure and unwavering simply because God is himself sure and unwavering. Since God knows the end from the beginning, nothing ever surprises him, and he never needs to alter his plans or change his mind. What he has begun he will continue, and we can be confident of that. Paul expressed this confidence in regard to the church at Philippi, saying that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

3. *If salvation is by the gift of God, apart from human doing, then human boasting is excluded, and all the glory in salvation goes to God.* I doubt any of us would want to be in a heaven populated by persons who got there, even in part, by their own efforts. The boasting of human beings is bad enough in this world, where all they have to boast of is their own good looks (for which they are not responsible), their money, their friends, or whatever. Imagine how offensive it would be if they were able to brag about having earned heaven: "Old Joe down there—he's in the other place—just didn't have what it takes, I suppose. He should have lived a good life, like me." Even if the only thing that determines a person's salvation is faith (thought of as something of which we *are* capable), it would still be intolerable for some people to boast of having believed, though others had refused to do so.

But it is not going to be like that! Salvation is a gift. It is receiving God's righteousness—apart from law, apart from human doing. It is, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:9). No one in heaven will be praising man. In heaven the glory will go to God only. *Soli deo gloria!*

Thank God it is that way.

Chapter 42.
Amazing Grace

Romans 3:22-24

In the last study I introduced four doctrines found in Romans 3:21-31: (1) God has provided a righteousness of his own for men and women, a righteousness we do not possess ourselves; (2) this righteousness is by grace; (3) it is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in dying for his people, redeeming them from their sin, that has made this grace on God's part possible; and (4) this righteousness, which God has graciously provided, becomes ours through simple faith. We have already looked at the first of these four doctrines: the righteousness that God has made available to us apart from law. Now we will examine the second doctrine: that this righteousness becomes ours by the grace of God alone, apart from human merit.

That is the meaning of grace, of course. It is God's favor to us *apart from human merit.* Indeed, it is favor when we deserve the precise opposite. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written, "There is no more wonderful word than 'grace.' It means unmerited favor or kindness shown to one who is utterly undeserving.... It is not merely a free gift, but a free gift to those who deserve the exact opposite, and it is given to us while we are 'without hope and without God in the world.' "

But how are we to do justice to this great concept today? We have too high an opinion of ourselves even to understand grace, let alone to appreciate it. We speak of it certainly. We sing, "Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—That saved a wretch like me!" But we do not think of ourselves as wretches needing to be saved. Rather, we think of ourselves as quite worthy. One teacher has said, "Amazing grace is no longer amazing to us." In our view, it is not even grace.

There Is No Difference

This is why the idea expressed in Romans 3:23 is inserted at this point. For many years, whenever I came to this verse, I had a feeling that it

was somehow in the wrong place. It was not that Romans 3:23 is untrue. Obviously it is, for that is what Romans 1:18-3:20 is all about. What bothered me is that the verse did not seem to belong here. I felt that the words "there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" belonged with that earlier section. The verse seemed somehow an intrusion here, because Romans 3:21-31 is not talking about sin but about the way of salvation.

I think differently now, however. And the reason I think differently is that I now understand the connection between this verse and grace. The reason we do not appreciate grace is that we do not really believe Romans 3:23. Or, if we do, we believe it in a far lesser sense than Paul intended.

Let me use a story to explain what I mean. In his classic little book *All of Grace,* Charles Haddon Spurgeon begins with the story of a preacher from the north of England who went to call on a poor woman. He knew that she needed help. So, with money from the church in his hand, he made his way through the poor section of the city to where she lived, climbed the four flights of stairs to her tiny attic apartment, and then knocked at the door. There was no answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. He went away. The next week he saw the woman in church and told her that he knew of her need and had been trying to help her. "I called at your room the other day, but you were not home," he said. "At what time did you call, sir?" she asked.

"About noon."

"Oh, dear," she answered. "I was home, and I heard you knocking. But I did not answer. I thought it was the man calling for the rent."

This is a good illustration of grace and of our natural inability to appreciate it. But isn't it true that, although most of us laugh at this story, we unfortunately also fail to identify with it? In fact, we may even be laughing at the poor woman rather than at the story, because we consider her to be in a quite different situation from ourselves. She was unable to pay the rent. We know people like that. We feel sorry for

them. But we think that is not our condition. We *can* pay. We pay our bills here, and we suppose (even though we may officially deny it) that we will be able to pay something—a down payment even if not the full amount—on our outstanding balance in heaven. So we bar the door, not because we are afraid that God is coming to collect the rent, but because we fear he is coming with grace and we do not want a handout. We do not consider our situation to be desperate.

But, you see, if the first chapters of Romans have meant anything to us, they have shown that spiritually "there is no difference" between us and even the most destitute of persons. As far as God's requirements are concerned, there is no difference between us and the most desperate or disreputable character in history.

I have in my library a fairly old book entitled *Grace and Truth*, written by the Scottish preacher
W. P. Mackay. Wisely, in my judgment, the first chapter of the book begins with a study of "there is no difference." I say "wisely," because, as the author shows, until we know that in God's sight there is no difference between us and even the wildest profligate, we cannot be saved. Nor can we appreciate the nature and extent of the grace needed to rescue us from our dilemma.

Mackay illustrates this point with an anecdote. Someone was once speaking to a rich English lady, stressing that every human being is a sinner. She replied with some astonishment, "But ladies are not sinners!"

"Then who are?" the person asked her.

"Just young men in their foolish days," was her reply.

When the person explained the gospel further, insisting that if she was to be saved by Christ, she would have to be saved exactly as her footman needed to be saved—by the unmerited grace of God in Christ's atonement—she retorted, "Well, then, I will not be saved!" That was her decision, of course, but it was tragic.

If you want to be saved by God, you must approach grace on the basis of Romans 1:18-3:20—on the grounds of your utter ruin in sin—and not on the basis of any supposed merit in yourself.

Common Grace

It is astonishing that we should fail to understand grace, of course, because all human beings have experienced it in a general but nonsaving way, even if they are not saved or have not even the slightest familiarity with Christianity. We have experienced what theologians call "common grace," the grace that God has shown to the whole of humanity. Jesus spoke of it when he reminded his listeners that God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45b).

When Adam and Eve sinned, the race came under judgment. No one deserved anything good. If God had taken Adam and Eve in that moment and cast them into the lake of fire, he would have been entirely just in doing so, and the angels could still have sung with great joy: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). Or, if God had spared Adam and Eve, allowing them to increase until there was a great mass of humanity in the world and then had brushed all people aside into everlasting torment, God would still have been just. God does not owe us anything. Consequently, the natural blessings we have are due not to our own righteousness or abilities but to common grace.

Let me try to state this clearly once more. If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, you are still a recipient of God's common grace, whether you acknowledge it or not. If you are alive and not in hell at this moment, it is because of God's common grace. If you are in good health and not wasting away in some ward of hopeless patients in a hospital, it is because of common grace. If you have a home and are not wandering about on city streets, it is because of God's grace. If you have clothes to wear and food to eat, it is because of God's grace. The list could be endless. There is no one living who has not been the recipient of God's common grace in countless ways. So, if you think that it is not by grace

but by your merits alone that you possess these blessings, you show your ignorance of spiritual matters and disclose how far you are from God's kingdom.

Unmerited Grace

But it is not common grace that Paul is referring to in our Romans text, important as common grace is. It is the specific, saving grace of God in salvation, which is not "common" (in the sense that all persons experience it regardless of their relationship to God), but rather is a gift received only by some through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from merit.

This is the point we need chiefly to stress, of course, for it takes us back to the story of the preacher's visit to the poor woman and reminds us that the reason we do not appreciate grace is that we think we deserve it. We do not deserve it! If we did, it would not be grace. It would be our due, and we have already seen that the only thing rightly due us in our sinful condition is a full outpouring of God's just wrath and condemnation. So I say again: *Grace is apart from good works.* Grace is apart from merit. We should be getting this by now, because each of the blessings enumerated in this great chapter of Romans is apart from works, law, or merit—which are only various ways of saying the same thing.

The righteousness of God, which is also *from* God, is apart from works.

Grace, which is the source of that righteousness, is apart from works.

Redemption, which makes grace possible, is apart from works.

Justification is apart from works.

Salvation from beginning to end is apart from works. In other words, it is free. This must have been the chief idea in Paul's mind when he wrote these verses, for he emphasizes the matter by repeating it. He says that we are "justified *freely* by his *grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (v. 24, italics mine).

One of the most substantial works on grace that I have come across is by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, and it goes by that title: *Grace.* In the very first chapter Chafer has a section captioned "Seven Fundamental Facts About Grace." I am not happy with everything he says in this section, particularly the last two of these points. But I refer to him here because of what he says about grace and demerit:

1. "Grace is not withheld because of demerit" and
2. "Grace cannot be lessened because of demerit."

These are important points, since they emphasize the bright side of what usually appears to us as undesirable teaching.

Most of us resent the thought of "free" grace. We want to earn our own way, and we resent the suggestion that we are unable to scale the high walls of heaven by our own devices. We must be humbled before we will even give ear to the idea.

But if we have been humbled—if God has humbled us—the doctrine of grace becomes a marvelous encouragement and comfort. It tells us that the grace of God will never be withheld because of anything we may have done, however evil it was, nor will it be lessened because of that or any other evil we may do. The self-righteous person imagines that God scoops grace out of a barrel, giving much to the person who has sinned much and needs much, but giving only a little to the person who has sinned little and needs little. That is one way of wrongly mixing grace with merit. But the person who is conscious of his or her sin often imagines something similar, though opposite in direction. Such people think of God's withholding grace because of their great sin, or perhaps even putting grace back into his barrel when they sin badly.

Thank God grace is not bestowed on this principle! As Chafer says:

God cannot propose to do less in grace for one who is sinful than he would have done had that one been less sinful. Grace is never exercised by him making up what may be lacking in the life and character of a sinner. In such a case, much sinfulness would call for much grace, and

little sinfulness would call for little grace. [Instead] the sin question has been set aside forever, and equal exercise of grace is extended to all who believe. It never falls short of being the measureless saving grace of God. Thus, grace could not be increased, for it is the expression of his infinite love; it could not be diminished, for every limitation that human sin might impose on the action of a righteous God has, through the propitiation of the cross, been dismissed forever.

Grace humbles us, because it teaches that salvation is apart from human merit. At the same time, it encourages us to come to God for the grace we so evidently need. There is no sin too great either to turn God from us or to lessen the abundance of the grace he gives.

Abounding Grace

That word *abundance* leads to the final characteristic of grace to be included in this study. It is taught two chapters further on in a verse that became the life text of John Newton: Romans 5:20. Our version reads, ".... But where sin increased, grace increased all the more." But the version Newton knew rendered this, "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (KJV).

John Newton was an English clergyman who lived from 1725 to 1807. He had a wide and effective ministry and has been called the second founder of the Church of England. He is best known to us for his hymns.

Newton was raised in a Christian home in which he was taught many great verses of the Bible. But his mother died when he was only six years old, and he was sent to live with a relative who mocked Christianity. One day, at an early age, Newton left home and joined the British Navy as an apprenticed seaman. He was wild and dissolute in those years, and he became exceedingly immoral. He acquired a reputation of being able to swear for two hours without repeating himself. Eventually he deserted the navy off the coast of Africa. Why Africa? In his memoirs he wrote that he went to Africa for one reason only and that was "that I might sin my fill."

In Africa he fell in with a Portuguese slavetrader in whose home he was cruelly treated. This man often went away on slaving expeditions, and when he was gone the power in the home passed to the trader's African wife, the chief woman of his harem. This woman hated all white men, and she took out her hatred on Newton. He tells us that for months he was forced to grovel in the dirt, eating his food from the ground like a dog and beaten unmercifully if he touched it with his hands. For a time he was actually placed in chains. At last, thin and emaciated, Newton made his way through the jungle, reached the sea, and there attracted a British merchant ship making its way up the coast to England.

The captain of the ship took Newton aboard, thinking that he had ivory to sell. But when he learned that the young man knew something about navigation as a result of his time in the British Navy, he made him ship's mate. Even then Newton fell into trouble. One day, when the captain was ashore, Newton broke out the ship's supply of rum and got the crew drunk. He was so drunk himself that when the captain returned and struck him in the head, Newton fell overboard and would have drowned if one of the sailors had not grabbed him and hauled him back on deck in the nick of time.

Near the end of the voyage, as they were approaching Scotland, the ship ran into bad weather and was blown off course. Water poured in, and she began to sink. The young profligate was sent down into the hold to pump water. The storm lasted for days. Newton was terrified, sure that the ship would sink and he would drown. But there in the hold of the ship, as he pumped water, desperately attempting to save his life, the God of grace, whom he had tried to forget but who had never forgotten him, brought to his mind Bible verses he had learned in his home as a child. Newton was convicted of his sin and of God's righteousness. The way of salvation opened up to him. He was born again and transformed. Later, when the storm had passed and he was again in England, Newton began to study theology and eventually became a distinguished evangelist, preaching even before the queen.

Of this storm William Cowper, the British poet who was a close friend of John Newton's, wrote:

> God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform;
> He plants his footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm.

And Newton? Newton became a poet as well as a preacher, writing some of our best-known hymns. This former blasphemer wrote:

> How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds In a believer's ear!
> It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, And drives away his fear.

He is known above all for "Amazing Grace":

> Amazing grace—how sweet the sound— That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found— Was blind, but now I see.
>
> 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved;
> How precious did that grace appear The hour I first believed.
>
> Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;
> 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.

Newton was a great preacher of grace. And no wonder! He had learned what all who have ever been saved have learned: namely, that grace is from God, apart from human merit. He deserved nothing. But he found grace through the work of Jesus.

Chapter 43.
Bought with a Price

Romans 3:24

In September 17, 1915, the distinguished Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, stood in Miller Chapel to deliver an address to the newly arrived students. The subject had been announced: "'Redeemer' and 'Redemption,'" and the young men were probably prepared for a difficult and weighty presentation. Instead Warfield talked about how wonderful the two words *Redeemer* and *redemption* are.

"There is no one of the titles of Christ which is more precious to Christian hearts than
'Redeemer,'" the professor began. True, other titles are more often on our lips: "Lord," "Savior," others. But "Redeemer" is more intimate and therefore more precious. Warfield explained:

It gives expression not merely to our sense that we have received salvation from [Jesus], but also to our appreciation of what it cost him to procure this salvation for us. It is the name specifically of the Christ of the cross. Whenever we pronounce it, the cross is placarded before our eyes and our hearts are filled with loving remembrance not only that Christ has given us salvation but that he paid a mighty price for it.

How do we know this is true? In proof of his statement, Warfield appealed, not to great works of theology dealing with the cross—though there are many of them—but to the church's hymnody. Many of the hymns in the hymnbook used that day at Princeton celebrated the Lord as Redeemer, and Warfield listed them:

> Let our whole soul an offering be To our Redeemer's name;
> While we pray for pardoning grace, Through our Redeemers name;
> Almighty Son, Incarnate Word,
> Our Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, Lord;...
> O for a thousand tongues to sing My dear Redeemers praise;...
> All hail, Redeemer, hail, For thou hast died for me;...

All glory, laud and honor To thee Redeemer, King.

Those are only six of the hymns he listed. He cited twenty-eight. But then, in case the students had missed his point, he did the same thing all over again with the words *ransom* and *ransomed,* which are near synonyms of "redeem" and "redeemed." He found twenty-five examples.

"Redemption" and "Redeemer" are the words to which we now come in our phrase-by-phrase exposition of Romans 3:21-31—"God's Remedy in Christ." We have outlined the passage by citing four great doctrines found in it: (1) the righteousness of God, (2) grace, (3) redemption, and (4) faith, by which these blessings are conveyed to the individual. This is the third doctrine. It is most precious to us, because it describes what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us by dying.

A Misunderstood Doctrine

In his address Warfield spoke of the "cost" of redemption. But here a problem develops for some people. "Isn't salvation supposed to be free?" they ask. "Haven't you just talked about grace, the unmerited favor of God toward us? Salvation can't be bought or sold. If you talk about God extracting a price for his favor, you make God cheap, begrudging, and mercenary. How can anyone believe that this is accurate?"

Because of such reasoning some scholars have tried to change the meaning of "Redeemer" and "redemption" from what I have suggested these words mean (and do mean) to something more like "release" or "deliverance," that is, to the process of setting someone free without any idea of paying a price for it. They point to Luke 24:21 in which the Emmaus disciples used the word *redeem* in their conversation with Jesus, saying, "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." Obviously they were thinking of a political deliverance, not a commercial transaction. Or they point to Ephesians 1:14, "... a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession." They argue that there is no suggestion of a price

in that statement. Rather, it is speaking only of our deliverance from the power of sin at the return of Christ.

Three Great Words

How should we respond to this objection? There are a number of ways. We could point out that the Emmaus disciples obviously misunderstood the nature of Christ's redemptive work. We could emphasize that, although redemption includes the idea of deliverance and is a word sometimes used for "deliverance," it is nevertheless a larger and more embracing concept. We might observe that, even though in the Bible a price for redemption is paid, it is never a case of our paying for redemption—we have no means of paying for it—but rather of *God's* paying the price in Christ, so that salvation might be free for us.

These points are all valid. Nevertheless, in my judgment, the best way of getting to the meaning of redemption is by a careful examination of the biblical words used for it. There are three Greek words, plus two important Hebrew words or concepts.

The first Greek word is *agorazō*. It comes from the noun used to describe an open marketplace in Greek-speaking lands, an *agora*. An *agora* is where all sorts of things—wine, grain and oil, pottery, silver and gold ornaments, horses, slaves, clothing and household wares—were bought and sold. The verb *agorazō*, which is based upon the word *agora*, meant "to buy" something in such a marketplace. Clearly a price was involved. Not long ago I discovered that the Greek Orthodox community of Philadelphia was using the word for an annual outdoor bazaar at which those of Greek descent raise money for their church. It is advertised as "A Greek Agora." *Agorazō* suggests that Christ's saving work involves his purchasing us for himself in this world's marketplace.

The second Greek word for "redemption" is related closely to the first. It is *exagorazō*. Clearly it is only the first word with the addition of the prefix *ex*, which means "out of." So *exagorazō* means "to buy *out of the* marketplace," with the idea that the object or person purchased might never have to return there again.

It is hard to illustrate this in terms of contemporary purchases. The closest we can come is redeeming an object from a pawnshop. But if we remember that in the ancient world some of the chief objects of commerce were slaves and that slaves could be purchased out of the marketplace (redeemed) by the payment of a price, this becomes a rich idea for us. According to the Bible, we are all slaves to sin. By ourselves we cannot escape from this slavery. But Jesus has freed us. He has done it by paying the price of our redemption by his blood. That is why Peter writes, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Here the idea of Christ's death being the cost or price of our redemption is inescapable.

The third pertinent Greek word is actually a group of words based on the root verb *yō*. They carry further the idea of being purchased out of the marketplace, for the chief thought of these words is "to loose" or "to set free." These words have an interesting development. *Yō* itself meant only "to loose or loosen," as in taking off a suit of clothes or unbuckling one's armor. When used of persons, it signified loosening bonds so that, for example, a prisoner might be released. It was usually necessary to pay a ransom price to free a prisoner, however. So in time a second word developed from *yō* to signify this "ransom price." It was *lytroō*. From it another verb developed: *lytroō* which, like *yō*, meant "to loose" or "to set free" but, unlike *yō*, always meant to free by paying the redemption price. From these last two words the proper Greek term for redemption came about: *lytrōsis* (and the cognate word *apolytrōsis*). These words always had to do with freeing a slave by paying for him. In Christian vocabulary they mean that Jesus freed us from sin's slavery by his death. Thus:

> Long my imprisoned spirit lay
> Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,

I woke, the dungeon flamed with light: My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee.

As long as we know that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished that, we will love him for being our Redeemer.

Old Testament Background

Important as a study of these Greek words for redemption may be, it is nevertheless true that the richest words for understanding the redemptive work of Christ are in the Old Testament. I refer here to two of them.

First, *kōpher*, which, like *lytron*, means "a ransom price." But it is richer than the Greek idea, because it refers to the redemption of a person who, apart from that redemption, would die. Let me explain. Suppose a person in Old Testament times owned an ox that had gored somebody to death. Under certain circumstances (we might describe this as manslaughter rather than homicide), the owner of the ox would be fined. But suppose there had been negligence. Suppose the ox was known to be dangerous and the owner had failed to secure the animal properly. In this case the owner of the ox could be killed. That is, he would have to forfeit his life for the one whose life had been taken. There would be little to be gained by one more death, of course. So Old Testament law provided a way by which, if the owner could come to an agreement with the relatives of the dead man, it would be possible for him to pay a ransom price, an indemnity, instead of dying. This ransom price was called the *kōpher*.

As I say, this term enriches our understanding of what the Lord Jesus Christ did in dying for us. For it is not only that in some way his death freed us from sin's power. Christ did deliver us from sin's power, but he also delivered us from *death,* which is the punishment God had established for transgressions ("The soul who sins... will die," Ezek. 18:4b). Therefore, for us to be redeemed means life.

The final words I bring into this study of "redemption" are *gāʾal*, which means "to redeem," and the related noun, *gōʾel*, which means "kinsman-

redeemer." This latter term requires explanation.

It was a principle of Jewish law that property should remain within a family as much as possible. Therefore, if a Jewish person lost his or her share of the land through debt or by some other means, a solemn obligation evolved on a near relative (if there was one) to buy the property back again. This person, because of close relationship to the one who had lost the property, was a "kinsman," and if willing and able to purchase the property and restore it to the family, he became a "kinsman-redeemer." In some cases, where there was no male heir to inherit the property, the duty of the kinsman extended to marrying the widow in order to raise up heirs.

A kinsman-redeemer had to fulfill three qualifications:

1. He had to be a close relative (a stranger would not do),
2. He had to be willing to take on this responsibility (nobody could be compelled to do this work), and
3. He had to be able to pay the ransom price (he had to have sufficient means at his disposal).

A Romance of Redemption

Those three conditions apply to and were fulfilled in the case of Jesus Christ. But to make them vivid, let me develop them in the context of an Old Testament story, the only story in the Bible in which we see a kinsman-redeemer in action. It is the story of Ruth and her "redeemer," Boaz.

In the days of the Judges there was a famine in Israel, and a man from Bethlehem, whose name was Elimelech, left Judah with his wife, Naomi and two sons to live in Moab. Not long after this, Elimelech died, and shortly after that the sons married Moabite women. One was Orpah, and the other was Ruth. About ten years later the sons also died, and Naomi and the two daughters-inlaw were left. Apparently the three were quite poor, so when Naomi heard that the famine in Judah had

passed and that there was food there, she decided to go back to her homeland and live again in Bethlehem. Orpah took her mother-in-law's advice and went back to her family, but Ruth insisted on staying with Naomi. Her entreaty (Ruth 1:16-17), which Naomi heeded, is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. Ruth said:

"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

Back in Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth were still quite poor, in spite of the fact that Naomi seems to have owned a piece of land (cf. 4:3), and the only way they could survive was by Ruth's going into the fields at harvest time to "glean" behind the reapers. Gleaning means that she was allowed to follow the workmen and pick up any small bits of grain they discarded. The law of Israel established this right for poor persons.

Ruth went to a field belonging to an affluent man named Boaz who, as it turned out, was a close relative of Naomi, a kinsman of her deceased husband Elimelech. Boaz was kind to Ruth, in spite of the fact that she was a foreigner. He encouraged her to remain in his fields and instructed the workmen to protect her and be generous to her, allowing a good supply of the grain to fall behind.

Can we say that Boaz fell in love with Ruth the Moabitess? Yes, we can, even though these are not the words in which the ancients recounted such events. (Strikingly, the word *love* does not occur in the entire Book of Ruth, though it is a love story.)

Naomi seems to have recognized what was happening as well as realizing that God was arranging circumstances so that Boaz could perform the office of a kinsman-redeemer for herself, in regard to her inheritance, and for Ruth, in regard to raising up an heir. So she advised Ruth how to make her claim known to Boaz. When she did, Boaz was delighted, for it meant that Ruth was interested in him also and had not,

as he said, "run after the younger men, whether rich or poor" (Ruth 3:10). Unfortunately, there was a kinsman closer to Naomi and Ruth than himself. Boaz promised to raise the matter with this kinsman and to perform the office of kinsmanredeemer if the other was unable or unwilling.

As it turned out, the other relative was interested in the land but was unable to fulfill the obligation to Ruth. So Boaz willingly bought the land and married Ruth. The story ends by relating that they had a son named Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David.

What a beautiful story! What a beautiful redemption for Ruth! J. Vernon McGee comments:

From the very beginning there was a marvelous development in the status of Ruth. First, she was found in the land of Moab, a stranger from the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. Next she was brought by providence into the field of Boaz, under the wings of the God of Israel. Then she was sent to the threshing floor of Boaz; and there she was seen asserting her claim for a kinsman-redeemer. Finally, in this last chapter of the Book of Ruth, she is seen as a bride for the heart of Boaz and as a mother in his home. What splendid progress! What scriptural evolution! From a very lowly beginning she was lifted to the very pinnacle of blessing. All this was made possible by a *goel who* loved her.

In redeeming us, Jesus fulfilled a similar set of qualifications: (1) He became our kinsman by the incarnation, being born in this very town of Bethlehem; (2) he was willing to be our Redeemer, because of his great love for us; and (3) he was able to redeem us, because he alone could provide an adequate redemption price by dying. We rightly sing:

> There was no other good enough To pay the price of sin;
> He only could unlock the gate Of heaven, and let us in.

The redemption of Ruth may not have cost Boaz a great deal, at the most only money, but our redemption cost Jesus Christ his life.

The Death of Great Words

At the beginning of this study I referred to the address of the gifted theologian B. B. Warfield, given to the incoming class of students at Princeton Seminary in 1915. I return to it now because of something else it contains. Warfield had spoken of "Redeemer" and "redemption" as being among the most precious words in the Christian vocabulary. But he confessed, as he came to the end of his address, that this seemed to be changing. The precise biblical meanings of these words was being lost, and with them something precious about Christianity. Warfield said:

What we are doing today as we look out upon our current religious modes of speech, is assisting at the deathbed of a word. It is sad to witness the death of any worthy thing—even of a worthy word. And worthy words do die, like any other worthy thing—if we do not take care of them.... I hope you will determine that, God helping you, you will not let them die thus, if any care on your part can preserve them in life and vigor.

But the dying of the words is not the saddest thing which we see here. The saddest thing is the dying out of the hearts of men of the things for which the words stand.... The real thing for you to settle in your minds, therefore, is whether Christ is truly a Redeemer to you, and whether you find an actual redemption in him.... Do you realize that Christ is your Ransomer and has actually shed his blood for you as your ransom? Do you realize that your salvation has been bought, bought at a tremendous price, at the price of nothing less precious than blood, and that the blood of Christ, the Holy One of God? Or, go a step further: do you realize that this Christ who has thus shed his blood for you is himself your God?

We have fallen a great deal further away from these great concepts since Warfield's time, and we are spiritually impoverished as a result. Yet the issue is the same. The questions are unchanged. Is Jesus truly your

Redeemer? Are you trusting in him? Your answer to those questions will determine your entire life and destiny.

Chapter 44.
Propitiation: The Forgotten Doctrine

Romans 3:25

There are a number of texts in Romans that have been especially used by God in the conversion of important Christian leaders. We have already studied one: Romans 1:16-17, which was used to bring Martin Luther to faith. It became his life text. Romans 13:11-14 was used to save Saint Augustine. In Romans 3:25 we come to a verse that has opened the door of Paradise to many.

William Cowper and John Bunyan

William Cowper was an eighteenth-century English poet who authored some of our most beloved hymns. He had a miserable childhood. His mother died when he was only six years old, and he was immediately bundled off to a boarding school where, being slight of build and of a sensitive nature, he was mercilessly badgered, bullied, and beaten by the older boys. Cowper struggled through this time and through his later early years as a law student. But terrors overwhelmed him, and on more than one occasion his mind seemed to fail. Twice he tried to commit suicide. At last, in the year 1756, the twenty-five-year-old Cowper was committed to a private asylum under the care of a man whose name was Dr. Cotton.

Two hundred years ago, being confined to an asylum often meant receiving the most terrible treatment. But Cowper's doctor was a devout old gentleman, and he treated the distraught poet in a way that brought him out of his depression and introduced him to salvation through the work of Christ.

Cowper had been much troubled by his sin, often crying out, "My sin! My sin! Oh, for some fountain open for my cleansing!" But he had

known of no such fountain. Now, under the care of this gentle Christian doctor, he discovered the only fountain that has ever washed away one's sins.

Here is how Cowper himself told about it:

The happy period which was to shake off my fetters and afford me a clear opening of the free mercy of God in Christ Jesus was now arrived. I flung myself into a chair near the window, and, seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply to it for comfort and instruction. The first verses I saw were in the third chapter of Romans: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to manifest his righteousness." Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone on me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon in his blood, and the fullness and completeness of his justification. In a moment I believed and received the gospel.

Cowper said afterwards that he could have died with gratitude and joy, so overwhelmed was his spirit in that moment. He was utterly transformed. Later he wrote of his conversion:

> There is a fountain filled with blood
> Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
> And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains.
> The dying thief rejoiced to see
> That fountain in his day;
> And there have I, as vile as he, Washed all my sins away.
> E'er since by faith I saw the stream
> Thy flowing wounds supply, Redeeming love has been my theme, And shall be till I die.

It is an interesting sidelight to this story that it was exactly one hundred years before this, in
1656, that the same text brought deliverance to John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress.* Bunyan's account of his conversion reads, "As I

was walking up and down in the house, as a man in a most woeful state, the Word of God took hold of my heart." Here he quotes our text. Then he says, "Oh, what a turn it made upon me! I was as one awakened out of some troublesome dream."

The Modern Revolt

Obviously, there is power in a text that has been so greatly used in the conversion of these and other Christian leaders. But how are these ideas received today? How many in our day are likely to be saved by Romans 3:25?

One difficulty is with the word *propitiation* (the word used in the King James Version of Rom.
3:25). Few understand what propitiation means, let alone love and respond to the concept. "Redemption" we can understand, at least in part. It is an image for Christ's work drawn from the world of buying and selling, and since we do so much of both, the idea of redemption is at least not foreign to us. But "propitiation" is drawn from the world of ancient religion. It signifies what the worshiper does when he or she presents a sacrifice to a deity. It is an "atoning sacrifice," an act by which the wrath of the offended deity is appeased or turned aside. Because this ancient world of sacrifices is so far from our experience, the idea of propitiation is hard to understand.

Then, too, there are our "theological" objections. Propitiation (as commonly defined) presupposes the wrath of God—a wrath that needs to be appeased or turned aside. But right here many modern thinkers stop, regarding wrath as highly inappropriate for Christianity. Such persons might say, "We can understand how the idea of propitiation might be appropriate in an ancient, pagan society, where God was not known and was thought to be vacillating, capricious, and often angry. But certainly this is not the God of Christianity. According to the Christian revelation, God is not angry. He is loving. He does not need to be appeased by us. All we need to do is recognize that he loves us and receive his forgiveness."

One theologian states sharply: "[Those who hold to] the 'fire and brimstone' school of theology, who revel in ideas such as that Christ was made a sacrifice to appease an angry God, or that the cross was a legal transaction in which an innocent victim was made to pay the penalty for the crimes of others, a propitiation of a stern God, find no support in Paul. These notions came into Christian theology by way of the legalistic minds of the medieval churchmen; they are not biblical Christianity." How extraordinary!

One result of this modern objection to the biblical idea of propitiation has been a retranslation of Bible passages that use it. The chief culprit here is the well-known British theologian C. H. Dodd. According to Dodd, it is not God who is to be propitiated but ourselves. So the important idea is not the turning aside of God's wrath toward us, but rather the covering over of our guilt which, according to Dodd, is best expressed by the word *expiation.* As a result of this argument, "expiation" rather than "propitiation" has been used in the relevant passages of the Revised Standard and the New English versions of the Bible, upon which Dodd has had an influence (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

But is this interpretation correct? Can words rightly be reassigned new meanings in this fashion? Surely, as Leon Morris says in his discussion of the term, "When we reach the stage where we must say, 'When the [writers] used "propitiation" they did not mean "propitiation,"' it is... time to call a halt."

It is certainly that time for anyone who has been studying Romans, for if anything is clear at this point (after having made our way through the first two and a half chapters of the letter), it is that it is precisely the wrath of God that is our problem. We are under wrath because of sin. Therefore, if the wrath of God cannot be turned aside by someone or in some way, we are lost. It is precisely this concept that we should be looking for. John Murray wrote, "Instead of stumbling at this concept we should rather anticipate that the precise category suited to the need and liability created by the wrath of God would be enlisted to describe or define the provision of

God's grace."

We can rightly express some appreciation for Dodd, of course, for he has distinguished between the mistaken pagan ideas of a god who *is* capricious and easily angered and the Christian God who is not. The Lord is indeed gracious. Besides, Dodd has made clear that it is not in our power to turn God's wrath aside or in any way alter his attitude toward us. But this is not the whole of the matter, and the correct approach is not to reinterpret the biblical data, but rather to seek a deeper and correct interpretation of it. Here are two important points to remember:

1. *Although God's wrath is not like the capricious anger of the pagan deities, his wrath is nevertheless a true wrath against sin; and it is this true and proper wrath that must be dealt with.*

We may feel, because of our particular cultural prejudices, that the wrath of God and the love of God are incompatible. But the Bible teaches that God is both wrathful and loving at the same time. What is more, his wrath is not just a small and insignificant element alongside his far more significant and overwhelming love. Actually, God's wrath is a strong character element. God hates sin and must punish it. The wrath of God is revealed in the Bible all the way from the opening chapters of Genesis to the final cataclysmic judgments recorded in the Book of Revelation.

2. *Although propitiation means turning the wrath of God aside, in the biblical framework this is never a case of mere human beings appeasing the divine wrath, but rather of God himself satisfying his wrath through the death of his own Son, Jesus.*

In pagan rituals, sacrifices were made by people trying to placate God. In Christianity, it is never humans who take the initiative or make the sacrifice. It is God himself who, out of his great love for sinners, provides the way by which his wrath against sin may be averted. In Jesus, God placates his own wrath against sin so that his love may go out to save sinners. As John Stott points out, "This was already clear in

the Old Testament, in which the sacrifices were recognized not as human works but as divine gifts. They did not make God gracious; they were provided by a gracious God in order that he might act graciously towards his sinful people. 'I have given it to you,' God said of the sacrificial blood, 'to make atonement for yourselves on the altar' (Lev. 17:11)."

The Ark of the Covenant

Having mentioned the Old Testament system of blood sacrifices, I come to one of the most beautiful pictures of the work of Christ to be found in all the Bible. When God gave Moses the law, he told him to build a portable tabernacle to house the Ark of the Covenant and be the focal point of Israel's worship. The tabernacle was an enclosure of skins that could be easily assembled
and disassembled whenever the people camped or marched. Within it was an enclosure consisting of an outer chamber called the Holy Place and an inner chamber called the Most Holy Place. The Ark of the Covenant was placed within this inner chamber.

The Ark was a gold-covered wooden box about a yard long, containing the stone tables of the law that Moses had received on Mount Sinai. (The first set of tables had been broken, but a new set had been written. It was these that were placed there.) This box had a cover called the Mercy Seat, and upon the Mercy Seat, at each end and facing one another, were statues of cherubim (angels) whose wings stretched upward and then forward, almost meeting directly over the Ark. In a symbolic way, God was imagined to dwell above the Ark, over or between the outstretched wings of the cherubim.

As it stands, the Ark is a picture of terrible judgment, intended to produce dread in the worshiper through a disclosure of his or her sin. For what does God see as he looks down upon earth from between the outstretched wings of the cherubim? Clearly, he sees the law of Moses, which each of us has broken. He sees that he must act toward us in judgment. God cannot ignore sin; sin must be punished.

But this is where the Mercy Seat comes in, and why it is called the *Mercy* Seat. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the Jewish high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people's sins. He entered to make *propitiation*, the very word that (in Greek) was used to translate "Mercy Seat." Moments before, he had offered a sacrifice for his own sin and the sins of his family in the outer courtyard of the tabernacle. Then he had sacrificed a second animal. Now he took the blood of that second animal and very carefully—lest he somehow violate the laws surrounding the sacrifice or intrude unworthily upon God's holiness and be struck down, as others who had done so had been—he entered the Most Holy Place and sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the Mercy Seat.

What is symbolized here? Now, as God looks down from between the outstretched wings of the cherubim, he does not see the law of Moses that we have broken, but instead sees the blood of the innocent victim. He sees that punishment has been meted out. Propitiation has been made. And his love goes out to save all who come to him, not on the basis of their own righteousness or good works, but through faith in that sacrifice.

We know, of course, that the blood of animals did not take away sin. The Bible tells us so (see Heb. 10). But the animal sacrifice pointed forward to the only sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who by his atoning death became our true propitiation.

"God, Be Mercy-Seated"

There are not many places in the Bible where the concept of "propitiation" occurs, but I turn to one of them in closing. It is a passage in which the idea is embedded in a story recorded in Luke 18:9-14.

Jesus told a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. The other was a publican, or tax collector. (We have a bad opinion of Pharisees today because of some of the things Jesus said about them, but they were highly regarded by their

contemporaries.) The Pharisee stood up to pray—as everyone would have agreed he had the right to do. In fact, if he had not prayed, he would probably have been asked to do so: "Come here, Mr. Pharisee. Stand up where we can all hear you. Now be quiet, everybody. The Pharisee is going to pray."

Pray he did. He prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like all other men— robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (vv. 11-12). I do not think the Pharisee was lying. I think he really did give a tenth of his income to the temple and really did fast twice a week. I do not believe he was a thief or an adulterer. Moreover, I think others would have concurred in this evaluation. Here was an outstanding citizen, a credit to his community. If anyone could be accepted by God on the basis of his character or good works, it was this Pharisee.

But then there was that other person, the tax collector. He "stood at a distance"—where he belonged. Most people regarded him as a no-good, money-grubbing, cheating, Roman collaborator. Jesus said of him, "He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (v. 13). And why not? He *was* a sinner. He had plenty to beat his breast about.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than the one between these two men. As to occupation, noble versus base. As to bearing, proud versus shameful. As to self-evaluation, self-confident versus cringing. Yet, when the Lord concluded his parable, he reversed the judgment every one of his listeners had been making and declared: "I tell you that this man [the tax collector], rather than the other [the Pharisee], went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14).

No dime-store novel, no cinematic melodrama ever had a more surprising ending than this parable.

And yet, it is an illustration of the very purest gospel! Can you see the point? Why did the tax collector, rather than the Pharisee, go home

"justified"? At first glance we might suppose that we have been overly hasty in our appraisal of the two men. The Pharisee appeared righteous, but perhaps he was not. Perhaps he had done things he was pretending he had not done. Perhaps he was a thief. Perhaps he was an adulterer. As for the tax collector—well, maybe he was better than he seemed. Perhaps, like the fictitious prostitute, he had "a heart of gold." Or perhaps he was actually doing good in the guise of a tax collector. Perhaps he was a Zealot operating "under cover."

We know perfectly well that this is not the way the story should be taken. It is true that the Pharisee was not justified. He *was* a sinner. But so was the tax collector. The only differences between the two men were that (1) the tax collector knew he was a sinner, while the Pharisee did not know it; and (2) the tax collector approached God, not on the basis of his good works (which he did not have), but on the basis of the provision of God for him, symbolized by the Mercy Seat and by the propitiation that took place there. Literally, his prayer was, "God, be 'Mercy-Seated'

[propitiated] to me, a sinner."

That prayer is worth exploring. It is one of the shortest prayers in the Bible—only seven words in English (NIV), six in Greek—but it is one of the most profound.

Consider the beginning and ending. The first word is "God." The last word is "sinner." Those alone are profound, because they show what results when a human being actually becomes aware of the true God. When anyone becomes conscious of God, he (or she) does not proceed unchanged in his supposed "righteousness," as the Pharisee did. (It is how we know that the Pharisee did *not* know God.) Rather, he is conscious of sin, and the more so, the closer to God he comes. We know that despite his reputation the tax collector knew God—because he came to God as a sinner.

Then—this is the great part of the prayer—between the beginning of the prayer ("God") and the end of it ("me, a sinner") are the words "have mercy on me," or "be Mercy-Seated to me."

Can you see what was involved? This tax collector did not only know God and know himself as a sinner, the starting point of all true religion. He also knew the heart of the gospel, since he understood propitiation, he knew that between the presence of the Holy God, who looked down in judgment upon the law that he had broken, and himself, there needed to come the blood of the sacrificial victim. And this meant that he was not actually pleading for mercy—though the prayer sounds like it—but was coming to God on the basis of the mercy already provided by God through the sacrifice. He was saying, "Treat me on the basis of the blood sprinkled upon the

Mercy Seat."

That is why we must preserve this and the other great words describing the achievement of the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation. We cannot be saved without propitiation. The wrath of God must be turned aside. God has shown how it is turned aside. He has made propitiation. Will you pray that prayer, the tax collector's prayer? No one will ever be saved without it.

Chapter 45.
Just and the Justifier

Romans 3:25-26

The Australian scholar Leon Morris points out, in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, that the first impression one has in turning to the subject of justification, after dealing with the words for salvation already treated in Romans, is the abundance of the material to be considered.

The word *propitiation,* though of great importance for understanding the nature of the atonement, is found only four times in all the New Testament (and not in all translations). *Redemption,* though frequent in contemporary Christian vocabulary and in the Old Testament, is not used very often in the New Testament. *Reconciliation* occurs in just five

passages, all of them Pauline. "By contrast," says Morris, "he who would expound justification is confronted with eighty-one occurrences of the adjective *dikaios*, ninety-two of the noun *dikaiosynē*, two of the noun *dikaiōsis*, thirty-nine of the verb *dikaioō*, ten of the noun *dikaiōma*, and five of the adverb *dikaios*." Thus, the frequency of the words alone would indicate that "justification" is the central or pivotal idea in the doctrine of salvation.

John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, called justification "the main hinge on which salvation turns."

Thomas Cranmer, the framer of the Church of England, believed that justification is "the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion." He declared that "whosoever denieth [this doctrine] is not to be counted for a true Christian man... but for an adversary of Christ."

Thomas Watson, one of the finest of the Puritans, said, "Justification is the very hinge and pillar of Christianity. An error about justification is dangerous, like a defect in a foundation.
Justification by Christ is a spring of the water of life. To have the poison of corrupt doctrine cast into this spring is damnable."

The great Reformer Martin Luther, in the words quoted earlier in this volume, wrote, "When the article of justification has fallen, everything has fallen.... This is the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed.... It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour." Luther said that justification is "the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines."

These statements are not exaggerations. They present simple truth, because justification is indeed God's answer to the most important of all human questions: How can a man or a woman become right with God? We are not right with God in ourselves. We are under God's wrath. Justification is vital, because we must become right with God or perish eternally.

A Salvation Triangle

Here is another question—one that is also important, at least so far as our understanding of the Book of Romans is concerned. If justification is as critical a doctrine as the frequency of the words for justification and the quotations from Calvin, Cranmer, Watson, and Luther seem to indicate, why have we not encountered it before now? Why have we not been studying justification earlier—in Romans 3 at least, if not in the previous chapters?

The answer, of course, is that this is precisely what we have been doing. The Greek word for
"justification" (*dikaiosynē*) is built on the word for "right" or "righteousness" (*dikaios*), and it is a lack of precisely this righteousness and our need for a righteousness (or justification) not our own that has concerned us. As far back as Romans 1:17, we saw that "in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...." What is this if not justification? Or again, in Romans 3, we saw that "a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify" (v. 21). This also is a reference to justification. In between those two verses—between Romans 1:17 and Romans 3:21—is a long section showing that no one is able to be justified by his or her own merits or good works. In fact, this section ends by saying, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous [that is, no one will be justified] in his [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

In other words, thus far at least, the entire Book of Romans has been about this doctrine.

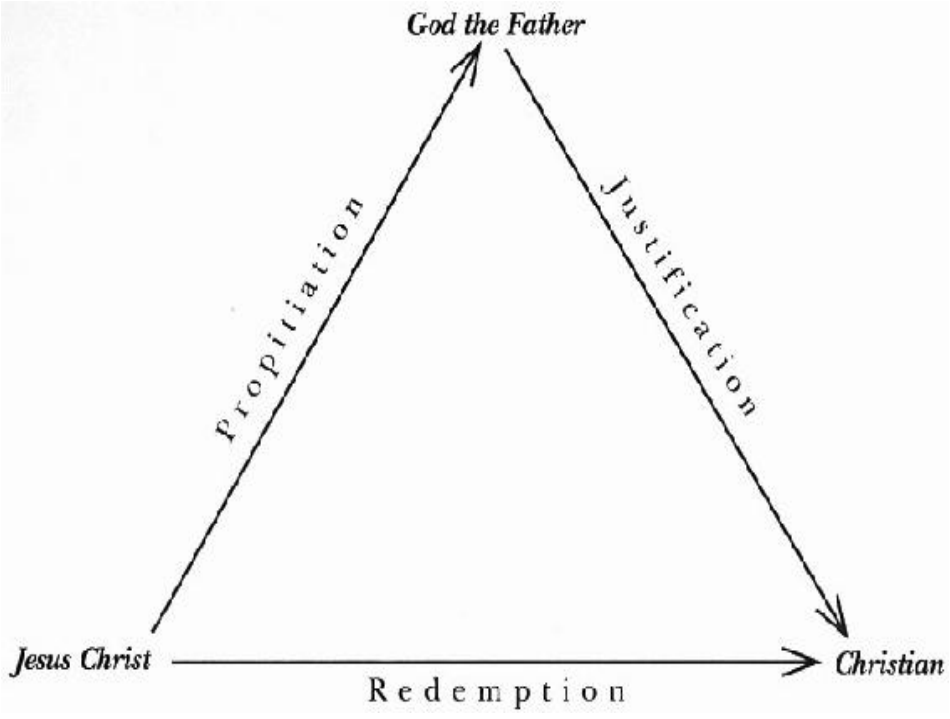
Another way of showing this is to indicate how each of the ideas that describes Christ's work in dying for us—redemption and propitiation—which we have already studied, is tied into justification. It is not possible to have any one of these without the others.

I find it helpful to portray this by what I call the salvation triangle. Imagine a triangle with one of its three sides on the bottom. Imagine further that the three points of the triangle represent (1) God the Father (the point at the top of the triangle), (2) the Lord Jesus Christ (the point on the bottom and to the left), and (3) ourselves (the point on the bottom and to the right). Imagine in addition that each of the three sides of the triangle represents one of the three salvation doctrines that we have been studying.

The line at the bottom stands for "redemption." It links the Lord Jesus Christ and mankind, because it describes what Jesus does in relation to

his people. He redeems them. He purchases them at the price of his own shed blood. Because this describes what Jesus does for us, and not what we do, turn that bottom line into an arrow pointing from Jesus to us. He is the subject of the action. We are the objects.

The line on the left, connecting the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father, stands for
"propitiation." It is there because propitiation describes what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us in relationship to his Father. As we saw when we studied that word, it is not ourselves that need to be propitiated. It is God. His wrath against sin needs to be turned aside. Moreover, we are unable to make propitiation. The work is beyond us. God himself must make propitiation, and this is what he does in Christ. Jesus, who is God, turns God's wrath aside. This line can also be turned into an arrow too —an arrow pointing from Jesus to the Father. As in the former case, Jesus is the subject of this action, but here the Father is the object.



The final line of the salvation triangle connects God the Father with ourselves, and this (as we anticipate) represents "justification." This arrow points toward us, for God is the subject of the action—he justifies us—and we are the object—we are justified.

This diagram tells us a great deal about how God saves fallen men and women. As you picture it in your mind, you will see that two of these actions (redemption and propitiation) issue from the Lord Jesus Christ. This indicates that he is the one who has achieved our salvation. It is *his* work. We are the recipients of two actions (redemption and justification). We contribute nothing to salvation. "Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9b). God the Father is the recipient of one action (propitiation) and the author of one action (justification). This makes clear that it is on the basis of Christ's work of propitiation that we are justified. It is because Jesus paid the price of our salvation by dying in our place that God can justify the ungodly—as we will see.

The point I am making here, however, is that these three works are inextricably bound together. It is not possible to have even a single one without the others. Consequently, everything we have been studying is in one sense a part of justification.

An Image from the Law Courts

But what does justification refer to specifically? Redemption, as we saw, is a term borrowed from the marketplace. It concerns buying and selling and indicates the price Jesus paid for our deliverance. Because the word was so often used in ancient times for buying slaves, it has overtones of delivering us from sin's slavery. Christ freed us from sin's slavery by his death. Propitiation, as we saw in the previous study, is a term borrowed from the world of ancient religion. It describes the sacrifice by which the wrath of God is turned from us. In ancient times pagan worshipers thought they could turn aside God's wrath by themselves, presenting sacrifices commensurate with their transgressions. But, although the idea is the same, in Christianity it is understood that no mere human being can placate or turn aside God's wrath. Only God can do that, and that is precisely what he has done through the only sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

What about justification? This word comes from the world of the law courts and describes the act of a judge in acquitting an accused person.

As Leon Morris says, "Justification... is a legal term indicating the process of declaring righteous."

It is important to note those two legalistic words: "acquitting" and "declaring." This is because the single most serious error in trying to understand justification is to suppose that it means "to *make* righteous" in the sense of actually producing righteousness in the one justified. As we will see in our final study of Romans 3, actual righteousness does follow on justification—so closely that we are correct in saying that if it does not, the one involved is not justified. But justification in itself does not refer to this change. The English word might lead us to think so. It is composed of the two Latin words: *justus*, meaning 'just" or "righteous," and *facio*, meaning "to make." At first glance this is precisely what the word seems to indicate: "to make righteous." But, as I say, this is not the right idea. Justification only indicates that the person involved has a right standing before the bar of God's justice. It does not indicate how he or she got that way, which is why the other terms—redemption and propitiation—are so necessary.

Let me put it in another way. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. When a defendant is found to stand in a wrong relationship to the law, he or she is condemned or pronounced guilty by the judge. Condemnation of that defendant does not make the person guilty. He or she is only declared to be so. In the same way, in justification the person is declared to be just or in a right relationship to the law, but not made righteous. A person *could* be declared righteous on the basis of his or her own righteousness; such a one would be pronounced innocent in a court of law. But in salvation, since we have no righteousness of our own and are not innocent, we are declared righteous on the grounds of Christ's atonement.

A Well-Developed Doctrine

It helps to realize that the full New Testament doctrine of justification is not merely justification alone but, to state it fully: *justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.*

This is exactly what Paul is declaring in the verses that are the basis of this study, Romans 3:2426: "[Those who believe] are justified freely by [God's] grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

Let's take that definition a step at a time, as John R. W. Stott does in his treatment of it in *The Cross of Christ.*

1. *The source of our justification is the grace of God* (v. 24). Since "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10), it is patently clear that no one can make or "declare [himself or herself] righteous" (v. 20). How, then, is salvation possible? It is possible only if God does the work for us—which is what "grace" means, since we do not deserve God's working. As we saw earlier, Paul emphasizes this by adding the word *freely* to the word *grace,* which is redundant but nevertheless good writing.

2. *The ground of our justification is the work of Christ* (v. 25). We have seen this in our discussion of the words *propitiation* and *redemption,* both of which are used by Paul here (redemption in v. 24, and propitiation [KJV] in v. 25). It is because these works have been done that God is able to forgive justly.

"Justification," writes Stott, "is not a synonym for amnesty, which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets (*amnestia* is 'forgetfulness')— wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice.... When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has born the penalty of their lawbreaking.... In other words, we are 'justified by his blood.' "

I fear that this pivotal doctrine is slipping away from people today. But it was not always in such low esteem. It was precious to Charles Haddon Spurgeon, to name just one past warrior—and it was the means of his conversion. Here is how he tells it:

When I was under the hand of the Holy Spirit, under conviction of sin, I had a clear and sharp sense of the justice of God. Sin, whatever it might be to other people, became to me an intolerable burden. It was not so much that I feared hell, but that I feared sin. I knew myself to be so horribly guilty that I remember feeling that if God did not punish me for sin he ought to do so. I felt that the Judge of all the earth ought to condemn such sin as mine.... I had upon my mind a deep concern for the honor of God's name, and the integrity of his moral government. I felt that it would not satisfy my conscience if I could be forgiven unjustly. The sin I had committed must be punished. But then there was the question how God could be just, and yet justify me who had been so guilty.... I was worried and wearied with this question; neither could I see any answer to it. Certainly, I could never have invented an answer which would have satisfied my conscience.

But then, as the great Baptist preacher recounted, light dawned on his soul. He saw that "Jesus has borne the death penalty on our behalf.... Why did he suffer, if not to turn aside the penalty from us? If then, he turned it aside by his death, it is turned aside, and those who believe in him need not fear it. It must be so, that since expiation is made, God is able to forgive without shaking the basis of his throne."

It is not difficult to see that this was precisely the problem Paul was dealing with in his cryptic reference to God's leaving "the sins committed beforehand unpunished" and "to demonstrate his justice at the present time." Paul was thinking in temporal terms, acknowledging that before the incarnation and death of Christ there had been something like a stain on God's name. For centuries he had been refusing to condemn and instead had actually been justifying sinful men and women—men like Abraham, who was willing to compromise his wife's honor to save his own life; Moses, who killed an Egyptian; David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband,

Uriah, to cover it up; and women like Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho. God had been saving these people. When they died he did not send them to hell. It would seem to anyone looking on that he had merely been passing over their sins—forgiving them, yes, but unjustly.

Was God unjust?

No, says Paul. In the death of Christ, God's name is vindicated. It is now seen that on the basis of his death, God had been just when he justified the ungodly (and *is* just when he continues to justify them).

3. *The means of our justification is faith* (vv. 25-26). Faith is the channel by which justification comes to us or becomes ours. This is the subject of our next study, but here we need to say at least two things.

First, faith is not a good work. It is necessary, absolutely essential. But it is not a good work. In fact, it is not a work at all. Faith is itself God's gift, as Paul makes clear in Ephesians 2:8-9. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Second, although faith is the means of our justification, it is also the only means. Luther expressed it by the words *sola fide* ("by faith alone"), thus adding a word not present in the text of Scripture but nevertheless catching the essence of the idea. Clearly, if faith is not a good work but only receiving what God has done for us and freely offers, then it is by faith alone that we can be justified—all other acts or works being excluded by definition. The only means by which any person can ever be justified is by believing God and receiving what he offers.

4. *The effect of our justification is union with Christ.* This idea is not stated explicitly in our passage, being held for Paul's later unfolding of the full nature of the gospel. But it does come later. It is the grounds of the benefits of salvation unfolded in Romans 5:1-11 and of our victory over sin explained in Romans 5:12-8:17.

John Stott explains it this way:

To say that we are justified "through Christ" points to his historical death; to say that we are justified "in Christ" points to the personal relationship with him which by faith we now enjoy. This simple fact makes it impossible for us to think of justification as a purely external transaction; it cannot be isolated from our union with Christ and all the benefits which this brings. The first is membership of the Messianic community of Jesus. If we are in Christ and therefore justified, we are also the children of God and the true (spiritual) descendants of Abraham.... Secondly, this new community, to create which Christ gave himself on the cross, is to be "eager to do what is good," and its members are to devote themselves to good works....

To be sure, we can say with Paul that the law condemned us. But "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

The question is—it is the third of my questions in this study—are *you* in Christ? Are you justified through faith in what he achieved for you at Calvary? There are many important questions in this world: Who am I? What am I here for? Where am I going? Who is God? How can I please God? But the greatest questions are: How can I become *right* with God, justified in his sight? And: Am *I* justified?

If you are not, you need to come to God as the tax collector came to him, confessing your sin and asking that he be merciful to you on the basis of Christ's atonement. Jesus said of the tax collector that "this man... went home justified before God" (Luke 18:14a). So may you be. It is that easy.

Chapter 46.
Faith

Romans 3:25-26

It is time to talk about faith. Wonderful as the salvation that has been accomplished by Jesus

Christ may be, it is of no use to us unless it becomes ours personally—and the way the work of Christ becomes ours personally is through faith. That is why the Bible says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God..." (Heb. 11:6) and why the apostle Paul speaks of faith so often in the section of Romans we are now studying—eight times in verses 21 through 31.

When we began our study of this section, I suggested a four-part outline of the doctrines Paul was presenting here. The outline was not inclusive, but it indicated the general direction of the passage. The points were these: (1) God has provided a righteousness of his own for men and women, a righteousness we do not possess ourselves; (2) this righteousness is made available to us by grace; that is, we do not deserve it and in fact are incapable ever of deserving it; (3) it is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in dying for his people, redeeming them from their sin, that has made this grace on God's part possible; and (4) the righteousness that God has graciously provided becomes ours through simple faith. In pursuing this outline we looked at the third point carefully—considering the various ways in which the work of Christ is presented to us—and this led to a study of justification, which is another way of talking about God's gift to us of his righteousness.

But we have done that, and we have now come to the fourth and last point of the outline: "The righteousness that God has graciously provided becomes ours through simple faith."

You can hardly miss this point if you read Romans 3:21-31 with care (but I will nonetheless add italics for emphasis). In those verses Paul tells us: "This righteousness of God comes through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (v. 22). He says that "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through *faith* in his blood" (v. 24). He teaches that God "justifies those who have *faith* in Jesus" (v. 26), maintaining that "a man is justified by *faith* apart from observing the law" (v. 28). Paul concludes that "there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by *faith* and the uncircumcised through that same *faith*" (v. 30). This message is clear. Faith is not a good work. It does not earn

salvation. It does not put God in debt to us. Nevertheless, faith is essential, for only those who believe on Jesus Christ are saved.

What Is Faith?

What exactly is faith? There have been many attempts to define faith, some of them misleading. Here are several good ones.

First, a definition by John Calvin: "We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." Calvin emphasizes what is stated by Paul in Romans, namely, that true faith is in God's freely offered salvation through the work of Christ. But he adds, as Paul suggests in Ephesians 2:8-10 though not in Romans 3, that this is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Here is another definition—by Charles Haddon Spurgeon: "Faith is believing that Christ is what he is said to be. and that he will do what he has promised to do, and then to expect this of him."

I like that definition, but I remember something Spurgeon said in the chapter of *All of Grace* in which he provides it. He told of an uneducated preacher who read a chapter of the Bible to his people at the start of his sermon and then said that he was going to "confound" it. He meant "expound" it. But Spurgeon noted that there is always danger of doing that where faith is concerned. We can explain it until no one understands it. "Faith is the simplest of all things," he said. It is perhaps its very simplicity that makes it so hard to comprehend.

How can we explain faith? How can we make the very complex definitions of the textbooks manageable?

The First Element: Knowledge

Most theologians and Bible teachers divide faith into three parts: "knowledge, belief and trust" or

"awareness, assent and commitment" or some variation of those ideas. But, in nearly every case, the point with which they begin is "knowledge of the truth" or what I call "content." Faith without content is no true faith at all.

Of the writers on faith, Calvin is perhaps strongest on this point, for he found it necessary to oppose a very serious error about faith that had developed in the teaching of the medieval church. In the years before the Reformation the church had been derelict in teaching the Scriptures to the people. Consequently, most people were ignorant of the true gospel of salvation, and most clergy were ignorant of it also. How, then, were such ignorant communicants to be saved? The church answered that it was by "implicit" faith. That is, it was not necessary for the faithful actually to know anything. All they had to do was trust the church implicitly. The church and its teachings were right, even if its members did not know what those right teachings were, and they would be all right, too, if they just believed or trusted the church.

The situation reminds me of a contemporary story in which a man was being interviewed by a group of church officers before being taken into membership. They asked him what he believed about salvation, and he replied that he believed what the church believed.

"But what does the church believe?" they probed.

"The church believes what I believe," he answered.

The committee was a bit exasperated by this time. But they tried again: "Just what do you and the church believe?"

The man thought this over for a moment and then replied, "We believe the same thing."

The situation was not unlike that of most people in the Middle Ages. So this was what Calvin attacked. He argued that "the object of faith is Christ" and that "faith rests upon knowledge, not upon pious ignorance." Calvin wrote, "We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the church has prescribed,

or because we turn over to it the task of inquiring and knowing. But we do so when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ (2 Cor. 5:18, 19), and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification and life. By this knowledge, I say, not by submission of our feeling, do we obtain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven."

This ancient debate has bearing upon the "faith" of many persons today, for although many probably do not exercise "implicit" faith in the church or in any other authority, they seem to have implicit faith in themselves or merely "faith in faith," which turns out to be almost the same thing.

The greatest offender at this point is Norman Vincent Peale, who has popularized a subjective faith in his best-selling book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. He suggests that we collect a few of the Bible's strong statements about faith—statements like "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23) and "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; nothing will be impossible to you" (Matt. 17:20)—memorize them and then let them sink down into our subconscious minds and transform us. In this way, says Peale, we will become believers in God and in ourselves: "According to your faith in yourself, according to your faith in your job, according to your faith in God, thus far will you get and no further." His last words are: "So believe and live successfully."

But believe *what*? And believe *whom*?

The advice Peale gives may be very useful for a salesman or for a person who is worried about doing well at school or at work. But this is not biblical faith. It is, as John Stott notes, only another word for "self-confidence" or "optimism."

To anyone who thinks that faith in God is roughly the same thing as faith in his or her job success or in oneself, the Christian must reply that this is not so. If it were, the object of faith would be irrelevant. But in

the gospel the object of faith is the all important thing. Our faith must be in Christ and his work rather than in ourselves. We are inadequate for what needs to be done. Therefore, we must trust Christ, whom God has sent to be the Savior.

Faith and the Word of God

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Calvin is so concerned about stressing the importance of knowledge as the first element in faith that he rightly presents it in another way, showing the necessary link between faith and the Word of God, or the Bible. Reduced to its basics, Calvin shows that: (1) faith is *defined* by God's Word; (2) faith is *born* of God's Word; and (3) faith is *sustained* by God's Word.

The first of these points is particularly clear in Romans 3. For Paul speaks of faith after having spoken of the righteousness of God (that is, the gospel) "to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (v. 21). It is after this that he says, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (v. 22). In other words, the faith in Christ about which he is speaking is faith in that work of Christ previously revealed in and explained by the Old
Testament. It has this specific content. It is not nebulous. Moreover—lest we miss this—the next chapter of Romans proves that the way of salvation was disclosed in the cases of Abraham and David who, Paul says, were saved by the same faith with which we are saved. He cites Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1-2 as evidence.

There cannot be any true faith without the Word of God, for it is in the Word alone that we learn what we are to believe. Calvin says, "There is [therefore] a permanent relationship between faith and the Word.... Take away the Word and no faith will then remain."

The second way in which faith is linked to the Word of God is that faith is created, born, or awakened in us by that Word. Apart from the Word, we are like Lazarus—as dead in our transgressions as he was dead in his cold Judean tomb. What will awaken us from that sleep of death? Nothing but the voice of Christ calling to us: "John, come forth!...

Mary, come forth!... Charles, come forth!" Only the call of the life-giving God can produce such new life. But where can we hear that call? Not in the words of mere men or women. Not in human books. The only place we can hear it is in the pages of the Bible, where alone God speaks.

That is why Peter speaks of our being "born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).

The third link between faith and the Bible is that it is through the Bible that faith is strengthened or sustained. Why? Because the Bible directs us to God and his promises, and only God is strong enough to support us in this matter of salvation. Calvin says, "Therefore, if faith turns away even in the slightest degree from this goal toward which it should aim, it does not keep its own nature, but becomes uncertain credulity and vague error of mind." The conclusion is that if you wish to be strong in faith and grow in it, you must spend time studying the Bible and appropriating the promises of God that are found there.

The Second Element: Moving of the Heart

The second element in true biblical faith is what I call the "moving of the heart" or what others have called "belief (Spurgeon) or "assent" (Lloyd-Jones). The idea here is that, important as the biblical content of faith is and which Calvin stressed so strongly, it is nevertheless possible to know this content and yet be lost—if it has not touched the individual personally. An example is the devil, who undoubtedly knows the Bible and understands theology better than we do, yet who does not believe it in this fuller sense. "Even the demons believe" but "shudder" (James 2:19).

The best example of what this second element in faith means comes from the conversion of John Wesley, the great evangelist. This took place in May 1738. Wesley had been an active preacher and evangelist for years before this. He knew Christian doctrine, but it had not affected him at a genuinely personal level. Although he "believed" in a sense, he

did not really love Christ or trust him personally. However, one evening he went to a little meeting in Aldersgate Street in London, where someone was reading Luther's "Preface" (actually a sermon) to the Epistle to the Romans. Here is what happened, as Wesley tells it: "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation. And an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death." Some might argue that Wesley had been saved before this and only came to know it at this point. That may be the case, but Wesley testified that this "warming of the heart" was an important part of what is meant by trusting Christ.

Here is how Calvin put it—after a long section (forty out of fifty pages on "faith") dealing with the element of knowledge or content: "It now remains to pour into the heart itself what the mind has absorbed. For the Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart that it may be an invincible defense to withstand and drive off all the stratagems of temptation."

The Third Element: Commitment

The third element of faith, which Spurgeon calls "trust" and Lloyd-Jones calls "commitment," is a real yielding of oneself to Christ, which goes beyond having knowledge, however full or accurate, or even being personally moved by the gospel. (Many are moved, even to tears, but are not saved.) It is the point at which we pass over the line from belonging to ourselves (as we think) and become the Lord's disciples. It is what was seen in Thomas when he not only believed in Jesus and his resurrection but fell at his feet in worship, exclaiming, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

It is at this point that faith joins hands with love, which it closely resembles, and hope is born from that union.

This leads me to the best of all possible illustrations: the way in which a young man and a young woman meet, fall in love, and get married. The first stages of their courtship correspond to the first element in faith; that is, knowledge or content. At this stage each is getting to know the other and trying to determine whether the other is the kind of person whose qualities will contribute to a good and lasting marriage. The second stage is falling in love. It corresponds to the "moving of the heart" element, that is, to the point at which the other person begins to affect the lover in a personal and usually emotional way. The final stage comes when the couple stands in church before the minister and recites the vows by which they pledge themselves to one another.

Jesus pledges himself to us; he has already done it. We pledge ourselves to him through the third element of faith: commitment.

In the wedding service that I use, the vows go: "I, John, take thee, Mary, to be my wedded wife; and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful husband: in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." The bride says the same words back.

This is how our faith is expressed to Jesus Christ. He died for us, demonstrating the nature of his true love and sterling character. He wooed us, getting us to love him who first loved us. Now he takes the wedding vow, saying, "I, Jesus, take thee, [whoever you may be; put your own name in the space], to be my wedded wife; and I do promise and covenant, before God the Father and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful Savior and Bridegroom: in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, in this life and for all eternity."

We then look up into his face and repeat the words. "I, [whoever you are; add your own name], take thee, Jesus, to be my loving Savior and Lord; and I do promise and covenant, before God the Father and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful wife: in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for this life and for all eternity."

God the Father (not an earthly minister) then pronounces the marriage, and you become the Lord Jesus Christ's forever.

Have you done that? Have you believed on Jesus Christ? Do you love him? Do you know yourself to have been made his forever?

You may say, "Well, I do not know if I have or not."

If you do not know, settle the matter right now. For most wedding services today there are months of preparation during which a church and minister are selected, a guest list is drawn up, clothes are purchased, a license is procured, and many other details are handled. But nothing remains to be done before you are able to make your commitment to Christ. He has done it all. The Father is there. The wedding is prepared. All you must do now is say your vow to him. You must believe and follow Jesus.

Perhaps you say, "But I am unworthy."

Of course you are. How could anybody possibly be worthy of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ?
All are unworthy, but it is precisely your awareness of your unworthiness that makes it possible for you to know you need a Savior. Paul reminds us that God has shown "his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Now you might say, "But my faith is so weak."

Yes, and your love and hope and everything else are weak, too. But it does not take *strong* faith to be saved, just faith. Spurgeon wrote, "The weakness of your faith will not destroy you. A trembling hand may receive a golden gift."

Reach out your hand. Place it in that pierced hand that is stretched out to you. Clasp it to your heart, and love Jesus forever.

Chapter 47.

Faith in His Blood

Romans 3:25

In the last few studies we have explored the multifaceted salvation achieved for us by Jesus Christ, looking at it by such terms as *propitiation, redemption,* and *justification,* and showing its application to us through saving faith. But there is one phrase we have overlooked and to which we must now return: "in his blood." It occurs in Romans 3:25: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood." This is the key idea and yet one of the most opposed ideas in Romans 3.

Opposition to the words is obvious. A number of years ago I was preaching about the atonement and mentioned the blood of Jesus Christ in my sermon. When I had finished I was accosted by a man who was very antagonistic toward such teaching. "Why are you Fundamentalists always talking about the *blood* of Jesus?" he objected. "Why do you wallow in something so repulsive?" He felt—and his later comments expressed it energetically—that modern Christianity should forget about such ancient concepts and focus instead on things like God's beauty. We should do away with hymns like Robert Lowry's "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." Or William Cowper's "There is a fountain filled with blood Drawn from Immanuel's veins...." According to this man and those who think like him, these hymns are not worthy of "modern" Christianity.

Are they correct in their opinion? I hope to show that not only are they incorrect, but in taking this view they actually miss the very heart of Christianity.

An "Evangelical" Error

Before I do that, however, I need to mention another problem that has arisen with the word *blood*—not from so-called modernists but from people within the evangelical camp. Evangelicals have traditionally believed that the phrase "blood of Christ" is a way of talking about the

death of Christ, much like the word *cross.* But the troublesome view I am referring to maintains that Christ's blood stands not for his death but for his life, which was released through his death and thus made available to us.

The idea seems to have originated—of all places—in a work by the great English churchman Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John.* Westcott wrote:

The blood is the seat of life in such a sense that it can be spoken of directly as the life itself.... By the outpouring of the blood the life which was in it was not destroyed, though it was separated from the organism which it had before quickened.... Thus two distinct ideas were included in the sacrifice of a victim, the death of the victim by the shedding of its blood, and the liberation, so to speak, of the principle of life by which it had been animated, so that this life became available for another end.

After Westcott, the idea was picked up by a number of other British Bible scholars, among them Vincent Taylor, C. H. Dodd, and P. T. Forsyth.

What are the grounds for this view? The biblical basis, as Westcott noted in his commentary, is in Leviticus 17:11, "For the life of a creature is in the blood" and Deuteronomy 12:23, "The blood is the life." Unfortunately, these texts do not mean what the proponents of this rather eccentric view suppose.

Beginning with James Denney's *The Death of Christ,* published originally in 1902 but issued many times since, a number of very careful studies of the use of the word *blood* in Scripture have appeared, including: (1) H. E. Guillebaud, "The Meaning of the Blood of Christ" in *Why the Cross?* , (2) Alan M. Stibbs, *The Meaning of the Word "Blood" in Scripture* , and (3) Leon Morris, "The Blood" in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. These studies recognize the scriptural connection between "blood" and "life." But, as Guillebaud says, "Blood is never mentioned except in connection with the shedding of it, or with

the use of it after it has been shed.... The blood shed is the life poured out, and the poured out life may be used only for atonement."

Morris says about the same thing: "In both the Old and New Testaments the blood signifies essentially the death.... [It is] another, clearer expression for the death of Christ in its salvation meaning."

Salvation by Substitution

If you have never heard of the mistaken notion examined above, do not worry about it at all. Dismiss it from your mind. The important thing is to remember that the shedding of Christ's blood has to do with Christ's death, and that the death of Christ in Scripture is always and everywhere set forth as substitutionary. It is by his death that you and I can be saved.

I have referred several times to John R. W. Stott's fine study of *The Cross of Christ.* It is an achievement of this work that, although it thoroughly investigates the biblical images for the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ, it never forgets that the basic idea in every single one of them is substitution—and that by the shedding of Christ's blood.

Let us consider each of the pertinent doctrines once more:

1. *Propitiation.* We have already noted that propitiation has to do with turning aside the wrath of God against sin. But how is that to be accomplished? God's wrath is against sin, and God's justice demands the death of sinners. The soul that sins must die. If the sinner is to escape that fierce wrath of God, the judgment of God upon sin must be poured out upon a substitute. An innocent must die in the guilty person's place. This is what Jesus did for us, and it is why Paul introduces the phrase "in his blood" at this particular place in Romans: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood." Since "sacrifice of atonement" is the New International Version's rendering of "propitiation," the phrase "faith in his blood" in this verse means "faith in his propitiation" or "faith in the atonement."

When we studied "propitiation" I pointed out that the concept is linked to the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant and that propitiation was made in Israel when the high priest sprinkled the blood of a slain animal between the symbolic presence of God above the Mercy Seat of the Ark and the law of God within the Ark below it. The blood testified to the substitutionary death of the victim.

It is with this in mind that the author of Hebrews writes, "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Heb. 9:11-14).

2. *Redemption.* The idea of blood (and therefore also of death and substitution) is present in references to redemption, too. Redemption has to do with purchasing the sinner from sin's slavery so that he or she does not have to return to sin's marketplace. How is this to be accomplished? Sinners have no resources by which to purchase their redemption. All sinners are bankrupt. Not so the Lord. The Lord is infinitely rich. So he substitutes for us, purchasing our redemption by his own death, or "blood." Here are some pertinent texts (in which I have italicized the key words):

Ephesians 1:7-8: "In him we have redemption *through his blood*, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

Acts 20:28: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought *with his own blood."*

Above all, 1 Peter 1:18-19: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but *with the precious blood of Christ,* a lamb without blemish or defect."

3. *Justification.* Justification, as we have seen, is a legal term, denoting the act by which a judge declares a defendant to be in a right standing before the prevailing law. But here the judge is God. We are the defendants. We want to be declared right before God's holy law. Yet we are not right. We are violators of God's law. How can we be "justified"—declared right? Obviously, only if another makes things right, which is what Jesus has done for us by his death. This is why two chapters further on in Romans we find Paul writing, "We have now been justified by his blood" (Rom. 5:9). It is by Jesus' substitutionary death and the propitiation achieved by it that we are justified.

Here is the way John Stott puts it in his summary, referring to redemption, propitiation, justification, and reconciliation (which we have not yet studied in detail since it is not included in Romans 3:21-31):

All four images plainly teach that God's saving work was achieved through the bloodshedding, that is, the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ.... Since Christ's blood is a symbol of his life laid down in violent death, it is also plain in each of the four images that he died in our place as our substitute. The death of Jesus was the atoning sacrifice because of which God averted his wrath from us, the ransom-price by which we have been redeemed, the condemnation of the innocent that the guilty might be justified, and the sinless One being made sin for us.

Where Is the Lamb?

These ideas are so foreign to the thinking of most modern people that it is a difficult matter even to make them comprehensible. But it was not always so. I want you to see in closing that they were actually the

steadfast, earnest, and joyful expectation of Old Testament believers, leading up to the coming of Jesus Christ.

To make my point I take you to a question recorded in a passage quite near the beginning of the
Bible. Genesis 22 contains the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his only son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, which was a picture of the eventual sacrifice of God's own Son Jesus at that very location several thousand years later. I direct you to it because of the exchange that took place between Abraham and his son while they were making their way up the mountain. Isaac was carrying the wood for the sacrifice. Abraham was carrying the fire and knife. Isaac noticed that there was no animal for the sacrifice.

"Father?" he said.

"Yes, my son," answered Abraham.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said. "But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (vv. 7-
8).

I refer to this exchange because the question asked by Isaac was the most profound question anyone could have asked during the Old Testament period. Indeed, it must have been the chief question of the Old Testament saints. In the same way during this same period, the answer of Abraham was the most profound answer anyone could have given. Think it through with me:

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, eating from the tree that God had told them not to eat from, God came to them—not to judge them with immediate death as he had said he would, but to show them the way of salvation. He took two animals, probably lambs, killed and skinned them and then clothed our first parents with the fresh skins. Adam, who was probably great in his spiritual understanding, no doubt

saw the point immediately. The fact that the animals died showed that sin does indeed bring death. "For the wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 6:23). But it also showed that it is possible to have a substitute die in the sinner's place.

Moreover, God promised a deliverer in his judgment on the serpent: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

Combining the two revelations, Adam must have reasoned along these lines. "I understand what God is teaching. The principle is substitution, the death of one for another. But I also understand that this can only be a type or symbol of what is coming, since a lamb is not the equivalent of a human being. The death of a lamb does not atone for the sin of a rational man or woman. If a genuine salvation is to be achieved for us, an actual deliverer must come. But when? When will he come?" Adam might well have asked Isaac's question: "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham was not present on that occasion, of course. But if he had been, he could have answered exactly as he answered Isaac so many years later: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." He would have meant, "I do not know when God will do it; but he has promised to do it, and he will certainly send the true lamb at the right time."

I press ahead through the centuries and come to Moses, another great man of God. When God was about to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt into their own land, he passed through Pharaoh's kingdom with one final plague, striking down the firstborn. Only the Jews were spared this fierce judgment, and then only if they had first killed a lamb and had sprinkled its blood upon the doorposts and lintels of their homes. Again, when they had been taken from Egypt and been brought to Mount Sinai, God gave instructions for the Day of Atonement, indicating that on that day other animals were to be killed as sacrifices for the people.

Moses must have understood these symbols, too, just as Adam must have understood the symbols given to him in the garden. If not, there would have been no point in God's having supplied the revelations. But Moses might still have asked Isaac's question. "I understand the principle of substitution," he might have testified. "Animals are being killed in our place. But surely the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin. The animals point ahead to something finer and more lasting. They point to the true lamb, the great lamb. But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Again, if Abraham had been present, he could have replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering."

David, too, could have asked Isaac's question. He understood the principle of substitution. When he sinned in regard to Bathsheba and later confessed his sin and wrote the great fifty-first Psalm as a pointer to the path to salvation, he put down: "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (v. 7). Hyssop was the plant used by priests to dip into the blood of the sacrifice to sprinkle its blood. So when David wrote, "Cleanse me with hyssop," he was pleading salvation by the blood of the sacrifice. Still, he could have queried its relevance: "I recognize that God has appointed sacrifice as the way of cleansing. But surely a mere lamb does not take away sin. It points to something greater. Where is that greater sacrifice? Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham would have answered, "God himself, in his own time, will provide the lamb for the burnt offering."

Isaiah could have asked Isaac's question, although his prophecy included the greatest statement of the principle of substitutionary sacrifice, or vicarious atonement, in all the Bible: Isaiah 53.

> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
> yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
> and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
>
> (vv. 4-6)

Still, he might have asked—indeed, in one sense that chapter does ask—"Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham would have answered, "God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering."

Jeremiah, Hosea, Habakkuk, Zechariah, Malachi—all the prophets—could have asked this question. And at the time of Jesus there were other faithful people who were asking it, people like Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna the prophetess, both of whom represented those who were looking for "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).

"Behold the Lamb"

At last there came a day—the fourth gospel writer tells us about it—when John the Baptist was baptizing by the Jordan River and a relative of his from the north, a man named Jesus, walked by. John, instructed by the Holy Spirit, pointed to Jesus and declared, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

What is that you said, John? Did you say, "Lamb of God"? Are you telling us that the sacrificial lamb we have been looking for and waiting for all these long centuries has come? Has the one who will save us by the shedding of his blood finally arrived on this earth? John answered that this is exactly what he said and that this is indeed the case.

Three short years later, while tens of thousands of lambs were being driven to Jerusalem for

Passover, probably in the year a.d. 30, Jesus himself went up to the city on the day we call Palm Sunday. Later that week, at the precise moment when the Passover lambs were being killed, Jesus died in our place, shedding his blood for our salvation.

The world does not like the very idea of the "blood of Jesus," and it is not surprising. His blood represents that for which we have the most extreme aversion: salvation from someone else, the sacrificial death of another in our place. We want to save ourselves, to be our own saviors. But we cannot save ourselves. If we are to be saved at all, it must be by faith in that sacrifice.

"What can wash away my sin?"

It may not be great poetry, but Lowry's hymn answers truthfully and conclusively when it says, "Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

Chapter 48.
No Grounds for Boasting

Romans 3:27-28

In most modern translations of the Bible, the New International Version included, Romans 3:27 begins a new paragraph—and rightly so. The section it introduces (vv. 27-31) is part of the latter half of the third chapter, in which the way of salvation is fully and brilliantly expounded. But it is also a postscript to verses 21-26. The earlier verses, the first paragraph, tell of the plan God has devised to save men and women. It is by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and can be summed up in the words "justification by grace through faith alone." The next five verses, which make up a second paragraph, present three consequences or implications of this plan.

The first is that this way of salvation "by grace through faith" *excludes boasting.*

The second is that it provides one way of salvation *for everybody.*

The third is that, far from allowing a person to indulge in immorality or lawbreaking, as some suppose, it actually *upholds the law.* God's way of salvation provides a level of morality of which mere adherents to law, apart from the grace of God in the gospel, cannot even dream.

These three consequences of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith will occupy us in this and the next two studies, which conclude the section of my commentary I have called "God's Remedy in Christ."

The Greatest of All Sins

It is appropriate that the first implication of the doctrine of justification by faith concerns boasting. For boasting is related to pride—it is an expression of it—and pride is the greatest of all sins, according to biblical Christianity. If pride is the greatest of all sins and God's plan of salvation does not destroy pride—rooting it up, casting it out, and even dusting off the place where it stood—then it is not a good plan. It has failed, and we need a faith other than Christianity.

In the Middle Ages pride was identified by churchmen as the first of the seven deadly sins. This evaluation seems quaint and overstated today. But pride should never be thought of as a harmless flaw, because pride is actually quite deadly.

I do not know of anybody who has written more perceptively about pride in modern times than C. S. Lewis, so let me share a bit of what he had to say on this topic. Lewis begins by calling pride the place where Christian morality differs most sharply from all other moral systems:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest

mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking of is Pride.

That is self-evidently true. But it is also a strange thing, isn't it? Why are we so unconscious of this vice in ourselves? And why do we hate in others that of which we are all so guilty?

The answer is in the very nature of pride. Lewis described pride as:

essentially competitive—competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or goodlooking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest....

The Christians are right: it is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. Other vices may sometimes bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But Pride always means enmity—it *is* enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God.

Pride was the very first sin. It was the sin of Satan, who said,

> "I will ascend to heaven;
> I will raise my throne above the stars of God;
> I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
> I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
> I will make myself like the Most High."
>
> Isaiah 14:13-14

Pride made Satan want to ascend into heaven to the very throne of God, but the Bible says it actually brought him "down to the grave, to the depths of the pit" (v. 15).

Pride was the sin of Eve, who wanted to "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). But she did not rise up to become like God. Instead she became like Satan in her perverted and fallen knowledge.

Pride was the sin of Adam, who could not abide even the slightest restriction on his quest for complete autonomy. He could not stand God's law. Adam wanted to be a law unto himself; so he sinned and brought the entire human race into misery.

Pride in Religion

Where in the range of human experience and relationships is pride most evident and at the same time most clearly wrong and inappropriate? Is it in the sphere of daily work? Do we show our pride most in thinking of ourselves as better than other people in what we make or do? Is it in our social relationships? Do we show pride most by thinking that we are more sophisticated or more charming than someone else? Is the person who wants to be the center of attention at the New Year's Eve party the most prideful of the persons we know?

No, the sphere of life in which people show the most pride is religion. And there is a good reason for this. Religion—not true Christianity, but religion in the generic sense—is the ultimate setting for the very worst expressions of pride. For it is in religion alone that we are able to claim that God, and not mere human beings, sets his approval on us as superior to other human beings. Moreover, the more demanding or rigorous our "religion" is, the more prideful we become.

Do we need an example? The Lord Jesus Christ provided one when he compared the humility of the tax collector, who was saved by faith in the mercy of God made known in the sacrifices, with the pride of the Pharisee, who boasted of his goodness: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-

12). What is the problem here? Was the Pharisee lying? Was he only pretending to give a tenth of all he had to God when actually, like lying Ananias and Sapphira, he was keeping back a part? I do not think so. As mentioned in a previous study, I think he really did fast twice a week. I think he really did give a tenth of all he received to the temple. By outward standards he was significantly superior to the despised tax collector, who even admitted that he was a "sinner" needing mercy.

But that is just it, you see. If the Pharisee had merely been asking a fellow human to appraise his achievements and declare him superior to the tax collector, it would have been unpleasant and perhaps inappropriate. But it could have been done. If we were being asked our opinion, we might have agreed with the Pharisee's assessment—but with a very bad taste in our mouths. We would have acknowledged it but disliked it, without even knowing why.

But the Pharisee was not asking a mere human being for approval. He was *demanding* it of God. And if it is unpleasant and inappropriate to think of submitting one's pride to a human tribunal, it is infinitely more unpleasant and inappropriate—a horror—to think of expecting the holy God to endorse one's own self-inflated judgment. Before God—if he could ever have become truly aware of God—the Pharisee's attainments would have faded away to nothing and he would have seen himself as no different from the tax collector. The fact that he did not see himself as a sinner in need of mercy shows that he did not actually know God at all.

Here is the way Lewis puts it:

How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say that they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid it means they are worshiping an imaginary God. They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of this phantom God, but are really all the time imagining how he approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people: that is, they pay a pennyworth of imaginary humility to him and get out of it a pound's worth of Pride towards their fellow-men....

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

A Boast-Free Gospel

But how can we possibly forget about ourselves—we who are so filled with pride? It is the very nature of pride to do the opposite. The answer is that in ourselves we cannot. That is what being saved by grace means; it means that we cannot save ourselves. We are no more able to save ourselves or forget about ourselves than are other human beings. But we are enabled to forget about ourselves when God turns our attention to Jesus, who died for us and binds the whole of our hope and life to him through faith.

Which brings us to our Romans 3 text: "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (vv. 27-28). Salvation by grace is the one doctrine that undercuts all boasting.

Think of the possible grounds for boasting that the doctrine of salvation by grace has "excluded."

1. *Morality.* The chief ground on which people suppose they can save themselves is morality, the doing of good things. If they believe that they are saved by this, and others are not similarly saved, they believe that they are approved by God because they are better people. That was the case with the Pharisee, as well as with certain "religious" people today. They look upon religion as the ultimate arena for human achievement. Others—they are very proud here—can achieve in business and gain the acclaim of entrepreneurs and others in high finance. Or they earn accolades in art or literature or an academic field. Ah, but to be acclaimed by God! That is the

greatest prize of all. So these people draw up their own little systems of morality, scrupulously adhere to their own sets of laws, and expect God to praise them. They fast and tithe and pray and do "good works" and suppose that by doing those things they become good people—good enough for God to save them—while others, who do not do them, are not good enough and so (quite rightly, they think) perish.

Salvation through the work of Christ undercuts all that. For not even the best of our
righteousness can be righteous enough. In fact, it is worse than "not good enough." It is actually evil, for it feeds the pride that lies at the heart of the evil in us all.

Over pride in morality, the Bible writes: "'There is no one righteous, not even one.... All have turned away, they have together become worthless; There is no one who does good, not even one'" (Rom. 3:10, 12).

2. *Pious feelings.* In past ages people worried about doing good, and for them the danger of trusting in one's morality was very great. People really did think that they could be saved by being better than other people. This has changed somewhat today, along with our declining standards of morality, and it is far more likely now that a person might have pride in his or her feelings. "I have such warm thoughts about God whenever I come to church," such a person might say. "I know I am not a very moral person. But my heart is so tender. I feel so close to God. At times tears even come to my eyes. Surely God must save such a sensitive person as myself."

Must he? If he "must," salvation is not of grace. It is a matter of debt or works. But since, as Romans tells us, salvation is not of good works, it is certain that no one will be saved by pious feelings.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once wrote on this point:

Souls, souls, this is work-mongering in its most damnable shape, for it has deluded far more than that bolder sort of work-trusting, which says,

"I will rely upon what I do." If you rely upon what you feel, you shall as certainly perish as if you trust to what you do. Repentance is a blessed work of grace, and to be convinced of sin by God the Holy Ghost is a holy privilege, but to think that these in any way win salvation, is to run clean counter to all the teachings of the Word, for salvation is of the free grace of God alone.

Over pride in pious feelings, the Bible writes: "'[There is]... no one who seeks God'" (Rom. 3:11).

3. *Knowledge.* Some people think that they are going to be saved by their superior religious knowledge and take pride from that. They are not particularly moral or even especially sensitive people. But they know a great deal of doctrine and have a very sound creed. How could God possibly condemn them when they understand the doctrine of the Trinity so well and when they talk or even teach for hours on such themes as redemption, propitiation, justification, the atonement, election, faith, and perseverance? How can God reject them when they have spent the best years of their lives in Sunday school or memorized "The Westminster Shorter Catechism" or mastered the lists of the kings of Israel?

Ah, but no one will be saved by mere knowledge. Although knowledge is a part of faith, knowledge is not faith itself. The devil understands doctrine far better than we do, yet he is perishing. Besides, if we are not born again, we do not know God (which is what counts) even if we have such knowledge.

Over pride in our knowledge, the Bible writes: "'There is no one who understands.... There is no fear of God before their eyes.'" (Rom. 3:11, 18)

4. *Faith.* The most pernicious ground of all for human boasting is faith. This is a particular danger for the evangelical. For the most part the evangelical knows that he (or she) is not saved by works—he has been taught that since his youth. Usually he does not trust in his feelings, though he thinks rather highly of them. He is even

> willing to give up on extensive biblical knowledge or sound doctrine as ground for his hope. But it is entirely different with faith. Faith is *the* distinguishing mark of the evangelical. So even though he has been taught there is to be no boasting in heaven, and even though he does not want to boast—and it really pains him to do so—when pressed in his doctrine the evangelical will admit that in the final analysis the reason *he* is going to be in heaven, and another person is not, is that he believed God and trusted Jesus while those who are perishing spurned him.

Sometimes evangelicals express their ideas in the following fashion. They say that God first gave the law to see if anyone could keep it. But since no one did or can, God now comes to us with a slimmed-down or much-facilitated gospel, as if he were saying: "I know you can't keep my law. So let me ask instead for something you *can* do. Just believe in Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, I'll save you."

I am sure that by now you can see clearly what is wrong with that idea. If that is the way God operates, faith becomes a work—something you or I do on the basis of which we are saved—and there *is* ground for boasting. We may not want to boast. But if we are in heaven a million years from now and someone comes up to us and asks why we are there and another person is not, and if we are pressed about it, we will have to admit that we are there because we had faith and the other person had none. Faith is our distinguishing mark. So, although we may not want to boast, honesty will compel us to boast just a little.

But that is not what faith is. Listen to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this subject:

Faith is nothing but the instrument of our salvation. Nowhere in Scripture will you find that we are justified because of our faith; nowhere in Scripture will you find that we are justified on account of our faith. The Scripture never says that. The Scripture says that we are justified by faith or through faith. Faith is nothing but the instrument or the channel by which this righteousness of God in Christ becomes ours. It is not faith that saves us. What saves us is the Lord Jesus Christ and

his perfect work. It is the death of Christ upon Calvary's Cross that saves us. It is his perfect life that saves us. It is his appearing on our behalf in the presence of God that saves us. It is God putting Christ's righteousness to our account that saves us. This is the righteousness that saves; faith is but the channel and the instrument by which his righteousness becomes mine. The righteousness is entirely Christ's. My faith is not my righteousness and I must never define or think of faith as righteousness. Faith is nothing but that which links us to the Lord Jesus Christ and his righteousness.

So let's have done with boasting in the church of Jesus Christ—"except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

Christians are all nothing but sinners saved by grace. If you do not believe that, you are not saved. You are still trusting in your own good works, your feelings, your superior religious knowledge or your faith—not in Jesus.

Jesus saves! That is the message of Christianity. If you believe that, you will forget about yourself and bow low before him.

Chapter 49.
One Way for Everybody

Romans 3:29-30

When the world seemed larger than it does today and the peoples of the world did not have much contact with one another, the fact that there were many religions hardly troubled anyone. Europeans had their religious doctrines and practices, and it did not bother them that the peoples of Africa or Asia had different ones. Orientals were not troubled by the different faiths of the Europeans. People were not troubled by other people's belief systems, because in most cases they knew very little about them. Today this is different. We know a great deal about the major world religions and often even something about

the minor ones. So for many people the question "Which of the world's religions are right and which are wrong?" is very puzzling.

There are three major ways of dealing with this problem.

The first is to suggest that religions are all more or less equal—at least if they are pursued sincerely. Many people in the past anticipated us in thinking along these lines. Edward Gibbon composed a cynical expression of it in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* saying that to the common people all religions were "equally true"; to the philosophers they were "equally false"; and to the magistrates they were "equally useful." Today the view is sometimes expressed by the image of a mountain. "God is on the top of the mountain," people say, "and the religions of the world are like roads going up the mountain from the various sides. Some go up one side, some another, but they all get to the same place in the end." This is the characteristic solution of American religious pluralism.

The second way of dealing with this problem is to say that, although the religions of the world all probably have some value (at least to their adherents), some are nevertheless better than others. It follows from this that one of these religions, whatever one it might be, must be the best of all. This view allows everyone to believe that his or her religion is, if not best, at least superior to some others. But it imposes the task of seeking out the "best," which is what many people believe they are doing.

The third view, the Christian one, is that there is only one way to come to God—it is through faith in Jesus Christ—and that the other religions of the world are really only ways of running away from him.

One Way of Salvation

This third solution is so contrary to the accepting or permissive spirit of our times that it is hardly safe to utter it, except behind the strong stone walls of one's church. This is because any such claim to truth, which Christianity certainly makes, is perceived to be narrow, bigoted, hateful, ignorant, wicked, cruel, base, vile, and intolerant—the kind of thinking

that has always led to genocide, religious wars, or witch hunts. But it does not lead to any of these things, as we will see.

The teaching that there is only one way to come to God is merely the natural outcome of the basic gospel of grace, which Paul has been expounding in Romans. He has spoken of human failure to live up to God's standards, showing that "'there is no one righteous, not even one.... no one who seeks God'" (Rom. 3:10, 11). He has unfolded God's plan of salvation through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, proving that the salvation provided by God through the work of Christ becomes ours by simple faith. Now, in the second paragraph of Romans 3, he is providing three natural conclusions or inferences from these doctrines, among which is the teaching that in terms of salvation there is but one way of salvation for everybody. These conclusions are:

1. Salvation by grace through faith *excludes boasting* (vv. 27-28),
2. Salvation by grace through faith means that there is *one way of salvation* for everybody, whoever he or she may be or whatever he or she may have done or not done (vv. 29-30), and
3. Salvation by grace through faith *upholds the law of God* rather than subverting it, as some suppose it does (v. 31).

The second point is the one Paul develops in Romans 3:29-30, where he writes, "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith." These verses teach that the fact that there is only one way of salvation follows from the fact of their being only one God. God is the God of all. So the salvation he provides is but one salvation for all. Far from being narrow or sectarian, this truth actually swings the grand door of salvation wide open for everybody.

The Lord Our God Is One

Each nation has its own set of prejudices, of course. And it is helpful in trying to appreciate this text to realize that Paul was running up against two entirely different sets of prejudices as he composed these verses: those of the Jew, who believed in one God but not in salvation for Gentiles, and those of the Gentile, who believed in salvation for everyone (or at least the possibility of salvation for everyone) but not in one God.

Let us take the Jew first.

The chief theological tenet of Judaism was its monotheism, and it still is today. Judaism is a religion of prayers and sayings, and chief among all the prayers or sayings is the *Shema*,
(Hebrew for "Hear"), recited somewhat as a confession of faith prior to the reading of the formal prayers in synagogues each Sabbath: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:6). This is among those great sayings that were to be kept before the people always: "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (vv. 7-9).

Nothing so distinguished the Jew from his pagan neighbors as his fierce and uncompromising monotheism. Nothing made his life more difficult, but nothing was so much to his credit. While the nations about worshiped the debased deities described in Romans—"images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:23)—the Jew maintained the highest conceptions of the one God and contended for him.

But with this conviction went what one commentator calls "a degenerate theocratic
exclusiveness." That is, a scorn of Gentiles to the point of supposing them to be scorned by God also. In the liturgy for morning prayers there was a sentence in which Jewish men thanked God that he had not made them "a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." The Jew said, "God loves Israel

alone of all the nations of the earth." A Gentile could be saved, of course, but he had to become a Jew first. Jewish monotheism did not extend so far as to save the Gentile as a Gentile without Judaism.

But the Gentile had overwhelming problems of his own.

Whereas Israel had monotheism with an accompanying exclusiveness, the Gentile had tolerance without monotheism. And what thoughtful person could prefer that? It was said of Athens that there were more gods in the city than people. What is worse, these many and diverse gods permitted and even encouraged the most debased moral practices. Greece was a moral cesspool by the start of the Christian era, and Rome soon became worse. To those who know the characteristics of these times, the portrait of pagan society drawn by Paul in Romans 1:29-32 and Romans 3:13-18 is no exaggeration.

What can be done? If we are firm in our conceptions of one great and moral God, the source of all good, we seem to become narrow, self-righteous, and bigoted. And it is not only the Jew who has been like this.

If we are broad in our doctrines, believing that all are equally right in believing in whatever god or gods suits their fancy, we plunge into polytheism and depravity. What is the solution? How can anyone find a way out of this dilemma?

The solution is the gospel that Paul has been expounding. It maintains the great high principle of monotheism, for it is the gospel of this one God. It flows from his grace. It has been accomplished by his Son, who died for us. It requires us to be like him. At the same time, the gospel does not promote any kind of exclusiveness, for it is a gospel offered to all alike—apart from their religious advantages or disadvantages, understanding or lack of understanding, good works or very evil deeds.

Here is Charles Hodge's comprehensive statement of this principle:

We have here the second result of the gospel method of justification: It presents a God as equally a God of the Gentiles as of the Jews. He is

such, because "it is one God who justifies the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith." He deals with both classes on precisely the same principles; he pursues, with regard to both, the same plan, and offers salvation to both on exactly the same terms. There is, therefore, in this doctrine, the foundation laid for a universal religion, which may be preached to every creature under heaven, which need not, as was the case with the Jewish system, be confined to any one sect or nation. This is the only doctrine which suits the character of God and his relation to all his intelligent creatures upon earth. God is a universal and not a national God, and this is a method of salvation universally applicable.

No One Cast Out

And that is what I want to do now. I want to apply the gospel developed in Romans 3 as universally as possible. My method is simple. I want to tell you that whoever you are or whatever you may or may not have done, this gospel is for you, because *it is for everybody.* I want you to see that if you will come to God in the way he has appointed for you to come—that is, through faith in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for you—he will receive you and will never cast you out.

Let me ask three important questions and then answer them:

1. *Who may come?* The answer is: everybody. All alike are lost in sin, and yet all alike are the objects of Jesus' saving love. The preceding portions of Romans show that the gospel is for the very great sinner as well as for the apparently moral person. It is for the pagan as well as for the one who considers himself or herself to be religious. Even if you are a very great sinner, you may come. Those described in the first chapter of Romans were great sinners, but the way of salvation through faith in the death of Jesus Christ was for them. Even if you are extremely self-righteous, you may come—if you shed your self-righteousness. Those described in Romans 2 were selfrighteous, but Paul is expounding the gospel for this type of person also.

What is your sin? Pride? Murder? Stealing? Adultery? It does not matter. If you will come to Jesus, you will be received. It is Jesus who said, "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37b).

What is your profession? Minister? Gambler? Businessman? Housewife? It does not matter. You may come to God through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

What is your condition? Are you seeking God? Running away from God? Fighting God?
Questioning God? Job was questioning God, but God was never closer to him than when he was.

Are you an indifferent sort of person? Some years ago I met a man who came to Tenth
Presbyterian Church occasionally, saying that this was "whenever my friends think I need a dose of religion." That kind of exposure will only inoculate you against true faith in Christ and will give you a false sense of security and well-being. Religion saves no one. It is Jesus Christ who saves. So don't come "to church." Come to Christ. The gospel is for you if you are one of these indifferent people.

2. *How may I come?* You may come as you are. Some years ago there was a fad in the United States known as "come as you are" parties. People would get an invitation to a party occurring a week or so later, but they were to come to it in exactly the state of dress (or undress) they were in when they got the invitation. Were they dressed to change the oil in the car? They were to come with oil stains. Were they covered with paint from some do-it-yourself household project? They were to come bespeckled. Swimsuits or formal wear! It did not matter. They were to come like that.

In the same way, you are invited to come to Christ in whatever mental or spiritual attire you may find yourself in.

Some come running to Jesus. I have known some. The gospel is preached, and they come like Zacchaeus, who climbed a tree to get a saving view of Jesus Christ. Or they come like Peter, who jumped into

the water to swim to Jesus across the Sea of Galilee. Preaching the gospel to people like this is like putting seventy-five cents in a soft-drink machine. The result is immediate. Moreover, they seem to come in full faith and with substantial knowledge. Catholics, many of whom have learned much doctrine but perhaps have not yet quite understood the gospel of grace, often come in this manner. For them the gospel is like the key in the lock that opens the entire treasure house of God at one turning.

Others come limping along with poor, faltering, hesitating steps. But that is all right. They may come, too.

Some years ago members of the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ at the University of
Pennsylvania began speaking about Jesus Christ to a young black student. He was not very much interested in spiritual matters. His chief interest was in making the freshman basketball team, and he kept working at this goal all through the fall. They invited him to go to a fall conference at which I had been invited to speak, but he did not want to go. He had no money. They offered him a scholarship. He said he did not have a way of getting there. They provided a ride. When he got to the conference center he was late and had not had any dinner, so he decided to go out for hamburgers instead of going to the first meeting. He came in when the meeting was about half over. I did not notice when he came in, but I was told later that he entered thinking about the tryouts for the team, which were to be held that Monday. I was saying, "God loves you, whoever you are; and he has a special plan for your life." These words struck him as a direct word from God. He sat down and listened. That evening he gave his life to the Lord, and after that he became an extremely effective witness for Christ to the black community.

Some people come kicking and screaming. Paul was reluctant. Saint Augustine resisted until God finally reached him in the garden of a friend's estate near Milan, Italy. C. S. Lewis described himself as "the most dejected and reluctant convert in England."

3. *When may I come?* You may come at any time. Come as a child. I am delighted when children show an interest in the gospel, which many do, especially if they are being raised in a devout Christian home. Some persons think that children cannot understand the gospel or believe on Jesus meaningfully. But that is not true. Children can understand a great deal if someone will just take the time to explain the things of God to them. Jesus commended the faith of children, saying that we must all come as little children to be saved.

Are you a child? If you are and if you can understand what I am saying now, you can understand three things: (1) you are old enough to sin; (2) you are old enough to die; and (3) you are old enough to come to Jesus. For Jesus himself said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14). If you are a child, won't you believe in Jesus and follow him? The way older people are to be saved is for you also.

You may be older. You may be thinking that you probably should have come as a child but that it is too late for you now. "I am getting along in years," you say. "It is hard to change when you are old." True enough! The old do get set in their ways; it is why it is good to come young. But although it is harder to come to Christ when you are older, it is not impossible. And it is never too late. You may not be able to do much for Jesus because of your advanced years, but he can do everything for you. You will not have much time on earth to serve him, but you will have an eternity in heaven to praise him.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that great Baptist preacher, wrote:

Oh, my dear hearers, come to Jesus! Come in the morning when the dew is on your branch, for he will not cast you out. Come in the heat of noon, when the drought of care parches you, and he will not cast you out. Come when the shadows have grown long, and the darkness of the night is gathering about you, for he will not cast you out. The door is not shut; for the gate of mercy closes not so long as the gate of life is open.

Will You Come?

I give this appeal, too: Come to Jesus!

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles, too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Is God the God of Americans only? Is he not the God of Asians, too? Yes, of Asians, too, since there is only one God, who will justify the Caucasian by faith and the Asian through that same faith.

Is God the God of Catholics only? Is he not the God of Protestants, too? Yes, of Protestants, too, since there is only one God, who will justify the Catholic by faith and the Protestant by that same faith.

Is God the God of upper-middle class people only? Is he not the God of working-class people, too? Yes, of working-class people, too, since there is only one God who will justify the uppermiddle class by faith and the working class through that same faith.

Is God the God of elderly people only? Is he not the God of children, too? Yes, of children, too, since there is only one God who will justify the elderly by faith and children through that same faith.

I can only think of one thing that could possibly turn you away from this gracious, embracing, "all are welcome" gospel. And that is that you do not want to go into the Father's house with all those other types of people. But if that is so, do not call Christianity narrow or bigoted or mean or self-righteous or sectarian. It is you who are sectarian, and Christianity is the only thing I know of that can cleanse you of that blight. Only Jesus can give you grace to place your pride aside and step through that wide door of salvation as the rebellious sinner you truly are.

No one else will go through—only sinners who have confessed their sin, turned from it, and believed on Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Chapter 50.
The Law Upheld by Faith

Romans 3:31

Two studies back, I began to explain the final paragraph of Romans 3 (vv. 27-31), pointing out that it contains three conclusions from or implications of the gospel. Let us review them. They may be expressed by saying that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ:

1. Excludes boasting (vv. 27-28),
2. Establishes one way of salvation for everybody (vv. 29-30), and
3. Upholds the law of God rather than subverting it, as some seem always to suppose it does (v. 31).

I have called these points "conclusions" from or "implications" of the doctrines of salvation established in verses 21-26. But, strictly speaking, the last of these points is an answer to a false conclusion or erroneous implication that some people, particularly religious people, might draw from the gospel. The apostle has spoken forcefully about salvation by grace apart from law. He has repeated the idea of salvation being apart from law twice, once in verse 21 ("apart from law") and once in verse 28 ("apart from observing the law"). "Well, then," such a person might argue, "if salvation is apart from law, as you say, doesn't the doctrine of salvation by grace set God's law aside and thus show it to be worthless? And if it does that, shouldn't your gospel be rejected as being quite false? Aren't we obliged to reject any doctrine that would nullify the revealed law of God?"

Paul's reply is that the gospel of grace does not nullify God's law. God forbid that it should! If it did that, it *would* be a false gospel, one rightly to be rejected. But it does not nullify the law of God. On the contrary, it

establishes the law and is, in fact, the only thing that does or could establish it.

The Law and Sanctification

There are two ways in which this objection to the gospel may be raised, however. One is answered later on in the letter; the other is stated here. The first could be deferred for now, but for the sake of completeness it is worth looking at both of them at one time, although we will consider the first one briefly.

The first (and most obvious) objection concerns the imagined negative impact of the teaching of salvation by grace on the Christian life. In Romans this error is exposed in chapter 6. There Paul imagines a person saying, "Let us go on sinning so that grace may increase" (cf. v. 1). In Galatians, which deals with the problem at even greater length, he imagines a person who says, "Let us use our freedom to indulge the sinful nature" (cf. Gal. 5:13). In both cases the argument is: "If we do not have to keep the law of God in order to be saved, why should any of us want to keep it? If we are saved by grace apart from obeying the law, we must be free to sin. So let's all sin. Let's indulge ourselves by doing any and every sinful thing we want to do—because, after all, we will get to heaven anyway."

It should not be too difficult to see what is wrong with this argument. It is wrong psychologically, if for no other reason. It assumes that the only motivation for right moral conduct is fear of hell or of losing heaven, when actually those are the least significant motivations.

The situation here is similar to what students of corporate management, like Peter F. Drucker, teach about vocational motivation. Many people, perhaps most people, suppose that the best way to motivate an employee is to offer him or her more money. But those who have studied this idea know that such is not the case. Actually, money ranks very low as a work motivator. Feelings of personal worth, being part of something important, respect, pride in the company, or hope for advancement all rank higher. In the same way, it is erroneous to suppose that a person will live a moral life only if by doing so he or she can earn

heaven. The highest motivation for godly conduct comes not from fear of hell but from love of God. It is because God has saved us by grace entirely apart from any merit in ourselves that we love and want to please him. Moreover, we recognize the importance of what we have become a part of by God's grace—the kingdom of God on earth—and we want to advance the goals of that kingdom.

The second error is theological. It is the false assumption that when a person is justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, he or she is personally unchanged by that process. Or, to put it in other terms, it is to suppose that one can be justified without being regenerated, or born again. Actually, the one effect never occurs without the other. So the one who is justified *always* shows it by striving for righteousness. If a person does not strive to live a moral life according to the law of God, the failure proves that he or she is neither regenerated nor justified.

Here is the way John R. W. Stott puts it. "The justifying work of the Son and the regenerating work of the Spirit cannot be separated. It is for this reason that good works of love follow justification and new birth as their necessary evidence."

The Law and Justification

Yet, as I indicated earlier, this is not the form of the objection that the apostle was thinking of when he composed Romans 3:31. This is because the theme of Romans 3:21-31 is not sanctification (important as that is) but justification, which is achieved for us by the work of Christ. So it is not that the law is upheld by "our faith" in the sense that we inevitably live moral lives if we are living by faith, true as that is, but that the "faith" Paul is describing—that is, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith—upholds the law.

This is so important I need to state it again in different language. The point is not that the law is somehow established by what we do as Christians by the power of the new life of God within. It is rather that the Lord Jesus Christ has established the law in the process of providing salvation for us by his death on the cross.

Or, to put it in still other language, God has established the law by seeing that the demands of the law were met in the way he provided salvation for us.

This needs to be taken in three parts.

1. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith establishes the law by showing that *the law is so high and holy that we who are sinners could never have fulfilled it.*

To see this, let us take a contrary situation. Suppose God had declared the cross of Jesus Christ to be unnecessary. Suppose he had said, "I do not think it will be necessary for me to send my Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for sinners. Rather than saving them in this manner—by grace—I will allow them to be saved in the way they obviously want to be saved, that is, by doing good deeds and by trying to keep the law. They cannot keep the law perfectly, of course, but I will set a certain standard that they will have to attain. We will call it a 'passing grade.' If they reach that, I will save them. If not, they will be lost." Obviously, if God had acted in that fashion, the law would not have been established but rather would have been diminished or nullified—or at least parts of it would have been.

Suppose God set the "passing score" at seventy percent of the law's just requirements. In that case, isn't it evident that he would have nullified the other thirty percent of the law?

If he had put the passing score at fifty, half would have been set aside.

If the passing score were ten percent, ninety percent of the law would have been made worthless.

Of course, the real scenario would actually have been even worse than that. Because, according to the Bible, not one of us keeps even one tiny part of the law of God perfectly, since everything we are and all we do is ruined by our radical and pervasive sin. If the cross were unnecessary and God saved us on the basis of what we could do, since we do not keep even one part of the law perfectly, God would actually be setting

aside the entire law, declaring that it is an unimportant standard after all. Instead, the doctrine of justification by faith establishes the law, because it shows that God continues to take each requirement of the law seriously, even though none of us can fulfill it. The law is "holy,... righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). Moreover, it remains the standard and would have condemned everybody, if a way of fulfilling its requirements (by someone other than a mere human being) had not been found.

2. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith establishes the law by showing that *the punishment of sinners by death, as required by the law, has been executed.*

The law had two chief spiritual functions, apart from its more basic role in regulating the civic life of the Jewish nation.

First, it taught that all are sinners. We need to be taught that, of course, because one effect of sin on the mind is to blind us to our true condition. The law was meant to convince us—by its high demands—that there is indeed "no one righteous, not even one... no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:10-11). It teaches us this because, if we are serious about trying to keep its commandments, as Martin Luther was, to give just one example, we soon discover that we cannot.

Second, the law taught that the punishment for sin is death. This teaching goes back as far as the early chapters of Genesis, where God told Adam and Eve, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). It is found in Ezekiel 18:4b: "The soul who sins... will die." Indeed, in one way or another it is found throughout the Old Testament.

Again, let us imagine a situation contrary to what is actually the case. Let us suppose God to have said, "I know that no one can keep the law. So I will exercise my grace and save people apart from meeting the law's requirements. I will just love sinners into heaven." If God had said that, he would not only have undermined the high and holy standards of

the law, suggesting, as we saw above, that thirty percent, half, or even all of the law could be dispensed with. He would also have shown that the punishments for disobeying the law were also arbitrary and that, in the final analysis, they are dispensable. He would have been like a father threatening to spank his child if he or she did not do something he commanded, when he actually had no intention of punishing the child in any way. The law could only have been established by carrying out the penalty of spiritual death—if not on us, then on Jesus Christ as our substitute.

Isn't that obvious? Take a current example. The law of a city specifies that the maximum speed permissible within the bounds of the city is thirty-five miles per hour. A man drives across the city line and continues on into the downtown area, going fifty miles per hour. He is stopped by a policeman. How is the law to be established in the case of the lawbreaker?

By letting him go? Obviously not.

By suggesting that the standard is perhaps too high and that fifty miles per hour actually is close to what probably should be required? No.

By making the offender promise to drive slower the next time? No, that is not a case of establishing the law either.

The only way the law can be established in the case of the speeding motorist is for him to get a ticket and for the necessary fine to be paid. Supposing the motorist had no money? To establish the law in that case, he would have to go to jail, unless someone could be found to pay the fine for him.

It is exactly the same spiritually. When the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for us, he showed that God took the law with full seriousness. The law demanded death for infractions. Jesus met that demand by suffering the law's penalty in our place. Therefore, by basing salvation on what was accomplished by Jesus' death rather than on what we could (or, in fact, could not) do, God established the law while at the same time providing a way by which sinners could be saved. Robert Haldane, one

of the great commentators on this epistle, asks rhetorically and rightly, "Can there be any greater respect shown to the law, than that when God determines to save men from its curse, he makes his own Son sustain its curse in their stead, and fulfill for them all its demands?"

In this respect, Romans 3:31 is a natural expression of the principle announced in verse 26: "He [that is, God] did it [that is, sent Jesus to be a sacrifice of atonement] to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." What is the standard of the justice established by Christ's atonement? Obviously, it is the law. So what Romans 3:26 tells us, to use different language, is that God established the law by having Jesus bear the penalty of the law for those he was saving.

3. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith establishes the law by showing that *it is on the basis of a true righteousness, righteousness that is an exact fulfillment of the law, that we are justified.*

Justification by faith means 'justification by faith *in Christ*," and Christ fulfilled the law perfectly. Do you remember the exchange between the Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist on the occasion of the Lord's baptism in the Jordan River? John did not want to baptize Jesus, saying that he ought rather to be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). The Baptist was right insofar as the meaning of his own baptism was concerned. His was a baptism of repentance, and since Jesus had done nothing sinful there was nothing for him to repent of. John was the sinner. He needed from Jesus a baptism of repentance for his sins.

But Jesus was teaching a greater truth. He was teaching that, having become man, he wanted willingly to submit to the righteous demands of the law of God. He wanted to take these upon himself. Galatians 4:4 describes him as being "born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law...." That is, Jesus deliberately placed himself under law as a man, setting out to fulfill the law in each of its particulars.

When God saves us, therefore, it is not just by having the Lord Jesus Christ die in our place, bearing sin's penalty. That is part of it. But the other part, the part I am discussing now, is that God saves us also by imputing to us this actual righteousness of Christ. We do not have it of ourselves. We are sinners. We have fallen short of God's lawful standards. But Jesus has not fallen short. He fulfilled the law perfectly, and his actual righteousness is now, by the grace of God, credited to our account. That is why Paul would later write to the Philippians, "... I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Phil. 3:8-9).

This righteousness is not something other than true righteousness. It is that real righteousness possessed and achieved by Jesus Christ. By saving us through this righteousness, and not by any lesser standard, God establishes the law that defines this righteousness.

Haldane asks, "Do we make law void when we conclude that through his faith he [the believer] receives a perfect righteousness, by which, in all its demands and all its sanctions, it is fulfilled?" He answers rightly, "No, it is in this very way we establish it."

The Heart of Scripture

With the exposition of Romans 3:31, which we have now completed, we have come to the end of the most important single passage in the Word of God. As we said at the beginning of our study of verses 21-31, this section of Romans is the very heart of the Bible, the most important and critical passage in all Scripture. We need to end by recalling what it teaches.

There are four great doctrines:

1. *God has provided a righteousness of his own for men and women, a righteousness we do not possess ourselves.* This is the very heart

or theme of the Word of God.

2. *This righteousness is by grace.* We do not deserve it. In fact, we are incapable ever of deserving it.

3. *It is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in dying for his people, redeeming them from their sin, that has made this grace on God's part possible.* Redemption describes the work of Jesus Christ in relation to ourselves; propitiation describes the work of Jesus Christ in relation to the Father; justification describes the act by which God the Father declares us to have met the demands of the law on the basis of Christ's work for us. It is because of Jesus' death that there is a Christian gospel.

4. *This righteousness, which God has graciously provided, becomes ours through simple faith.* Believing and trusting God in regard to the work of Jesus is the only way anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, can be saved. Faith is essential. "And without faith it is impossible to please God..." (Heb. 11:6).

These points were stated at the very beginning of the letter, where Paul wrote: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:16-17).

The important point is: Have you been saved by what is described in these doctrines? Have you been saved from your sin by Jesus Christ? Do you know that he died in your place to bear the punishment for your sin and offer you, in its place, his own perfect righteousness? Have you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior?

We live in a day—perhaps every age has been like this—when people are trying their best to establish other "gospels," other ways of salvation. Some are into good works, some into yoga or reincarnations or crystals or something else. But the Bible's gospel is not a human gospel, as those all are. The Bible is God's Word, and this is God's

gospel. It is the only true gospel. It is the only way in which a sinful man or woman can be saved. But, praise God, it is the way by which any man or woman may be saved—yourself included.

Believe it. And thank God for it.

Part Five.

The Gospel Proved from Scripture

Chapter 51.
The Case of Father Abraham

Romans 4:1-5

As Americans living in the twentieth century, we have two things working against us as we begin a study of the fourth chapter of Paul's great letter to the Romans. First, we value what is new more than what is old, and Paul's purpose in this chapter is to prove that the gospel he has explained in Romans 3 is not something new, but is that by which God has been saving people from the dawn of history. Second, we dislike rational proofs, and Romans 4 is an example of classic reasoning.

But it is important that we overcome our cultural liabilities at this point and actually listen to and believe what Paul is saying.

No New Doctrine

It might help us to understand what Paul is doing. When Peter preached the first Christian sermon on the day of Pentecost, he had a method that was the exact opposite of the one used by the apostle Paul. Peter's method was to quote an Old Testament text and then explain it, something he does three times in just the one sermon. That is: Scripture first, then explanation. Paul, by contrast, first establishes contact with his readers, analyzing the desperate condition of the human race without God and explaining the gospel as God's answer to that dilemma. Then, after he has analyzed the problem, he proves what he has taught from the Old Testament.

He has done this once already. After describing the dreadful depravity of the race in Romans 1 and 2, using the pagans' own terms for this corruption in 1:29-31, Paul established the same thing by the use of six Old Testament quotations—in 3:10-18. Now, having explained God's

way of salvation by the gift of grace through faith in 3:21-31, he proves what he has been teaching by two Old Testament examples: Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and King David (4:125).

How significant this is! Robert Haldane writes:

Nothing could be so well calculated to convince both Jewish and Gentile believers, especially the former, how vain is the expectation of those who look for justification by their own works. Abraham was a patriarch, eminently holy, the head of the nation of Israel, the friend of God, the father of all who believe, in whose seed all the nations of the world were to be blessed. David was a man according to God's own heart, the progenitor of the Messiah, his great personal type, and a chosen and anointed king of Israel. If, then, Abraham had not been justified by his works, but by the righteousness of God imputed to him through faith, and David, speaking by the Spirit of God, had declared that the only way in which a man can receive justification is by his sin being covered by the imputation of that righteousness, who could suppose that it was to be attained by any other means? By these two references, the apostle likewise shows that the way of justification was the same from the beginning, both under the old and the new dispensations.

Two times before this, Paul has indicated that salvation through the gift of God's righteousness, apart from law, had been announced beforehand in the Old Testament (Rom. 1:2; 3:21). Now he shows that it is not only something that had been previously announced, but was also the only way anyone either in the Old Testament period or the dawning New Testament era has been saved.

Father Abraham

Paul begins with Abraham, and it is clear why he does so. Abraham was the acknowledged father of the Jewish people and, with the exception of Jesus himself, the most important person in the Bible. Abraham is a giant in Scripture.

Think of the other great Old Testament figures. Moses was a very great man. He was the one through whom God broke the power of tyrannous Egypt and led the people forth into a new land. He was the lawgiver, God appearing to him in a special and unique way on Mount Sinai. David was the greatest of Israel's kings. He brought the nation to the pinnacle of its power in the ancient Near East, while expressing its greatest religious feelings and devotion in his psalms. Elijah was great among the prophets. Isaiah was a powerful statesman and a voice of God to Israel in dark days. Daniel was an outstanding statesman as well. But great as these Old Testament figures were, if asked, each would have confessed in an instant that Abraham was his father in the faith.

Early in Genesis we read of God's promise to Abraham that he would become the father of many nations (Gen. 17:5). This promise was fulfilled both physically and spiritually. Physically, Abraham became the father of the Jewish and Arab peoples, through Isaac and Ishmael respectively. Spiritually, Abraham became the father of all true believers, both Jews and Gentiles. He is our father in faith if we have believed on Jesus.

In the New Testament the origins of salvation are always traced to Abraham. Paul does it characteristically, as here in Romans and in the letter to the Galatians (chs. 4, 5). But it is not just Paul who does this. The New Testament begins with such a reference, Matthew's words about "Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). And Luke quotes Mary, Jesus' mother, as exulting: "[God] has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever..." (Luke 1:54-55).

Abraham is referred to as God's "friend" three times in the Bible (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). Why is that? The answer, as Paul is about to show, is that Abraham "believed God" and so was credited with righteousness (Rom. 4:3). If Paul can show that Abraham, the father of all the faithful, came into a right relationship with God by faith and not by any amount of human good works, his case is proved. Then

the gospel he is expounding is the true gospel; there can be no other. If he cannot prove this, the case is lost and so is Christianity.

No Good in Abraham

Where do we start in considering the case of Father Abraham? The place at which to begin—the same place we ourselves must begin, if we would be saved—is with the acknowledgment that there was nothing in Abraham that could ever have commended him to God.

This point is lost a bit in the New International Version because, for some inexplicable reason, the NIV has translated the Greek words *kata sarka* ("according to the flesh") in Romans 4:1 by the words "in this matter." That is not the idea at all. In the Bible "flesh" refers to human activity apart from God's influence. So the query of verse 1 means, "What did Abraham find to be the case so far as his own human ability was concerned? Did he find that he could be saved by it?" The answer, as Paul shows, is that Abraham was not saved by his own ability or good works but by a gift of God: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 3).

God did not look down from heaven to see whether he could find someone with a little bit of human goodness (even a little bit of human faith), on the basis of which it would be possible to save that person—and then find Abraham. It is not as if God said, "Oh, this is wonderful! In the midst of this corrupt and sinful race, a race which, I have observed, thinks and does 'only evil all the time' [Gen. 6:5], I have discovered at least one individual who wants to serve me. I see Abraham and his goodness. I think I can make something of him." It was not like that at all. How could it be? For, as Paul has just written in Romans 3:10-12 (quoting Ps. 14:1-3 and Ps. 53:1-3):

> "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.
> All have turned away, they have together become worthless;
> there is no one who does good, not even one."

If Abraham had no natural good in him, it is certain that he was not saved by human goodness. How then was he saved? The answer, as we have seen several times already, is by God's gift of righteousness to him, which he received by faith.

By Proof from the Scriptures

Paul does not merely mention Abraham's example in a general way, however. He refers to a specific Old Testament teaching concerning Abraham, and the text he refers to is Genesis 15:6. The context of the verse is the incident in which God took Abraham out under the night sky and promised him offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, even though at this time Abraham was eighty-five years old and had no children, and Abraham *believed* God.

From the viewpoint of the doctrine of salvation this is the single most important verse in the entire Bible. This is because in Genesis 15:6 the doctrine of justification by faith is set forth for the first time. It is the first reference in the Bible to (1) faith, (2) righteousness, and (3) justification. Thus, although we know that individuals preceding Abraham were also saved— Adam and Eve, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and others—this is the first time that any specific individual is said to have been justified.

How was this accomplished? Here we have to be extremely careful.

First, we need to dismiss what are clearly two serious misunderstandings of the text. One is the liberal misunderstanding, though it is probably what the great majority of Jews would have thought in Paul's day. It supposes that when the text says "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," it means that Abraham was just a good or pious man, and that he was justified on that basis. Obviously, if Abraham believed God when God promised him numerous children, Abraham was the kind of person who delighted in believing and obeying God, in doing what God told him to do. And, so this reasoning goes, it was because he was such a good man that God saved him. That is not justification by faith, of course. It is the opposite,

justification by works. But it is what many people fervently believe and what liberal scholarship teaches.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who discusses this error, points out that it is nothing less than the religion of the Pharisee, who went up to the temple to pray, saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-12). That is boasting. If that is what Genesis 15:6 means, it is the exact opposite of everything that Paul has been saying thus far in this epistle.

The second misunderstanding is not a liberal but an evangelical one. It goes like this: Since Abraham did not have any righteousness in himself by which he could be justified before God— but since God wanted to save him—God looked for something he could accept in place of righteousness. Since Abraham had faith, at least a little bit, God said, "Even though this little bit of faith is not righteousness, it is something I can work with. I'll treat it as righteousness and so save Abraham."

Even to put it like that shows the absurdity of this interpretation. For God is not a juggler of truth. God does not pretend a thing is something it is not. Consequently, if God counted
Abraham as being righteous, it must have been on the basis of a true righteousness—either his or someone else's—and not on the mere fiction of substituting apples for oranges or pretending that the sow's ear of human works is actually the silk purse of salvation.

There are several reasons why we should be warned against this second insidious but very common misunderstanding.

First, when the text says that "it was credited to him as righteousness," what does "it" refer to? What is the antecedent? The evangelical misunderstanding I have been referring to would have to maintain that the antecedent is the fact that Abraham believed God or the fact that he had faith. But this is hard to support grammatically. "It" demands a noun (or at least a verbal noun) as an antecedent, and the text supplies

neither. This fact alone suggests that we should look further for what was actually reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.

Second, there is the way faith is referred to in the rest of the Bible, specifically in the writings of Paul. It is never said that people are saved *because* of their faith or even *on the basis of* their faith. They are saved *by* faith. The Greek preposition is *dia* with the genitive, not the dative, and it means "by faith as a channel."

The Greek preposition *dia* can mean either (1) "because of or (2) "through." If it means "because of in the phrase *dia pisteos*, faith would indeed be the ground of salvation and a substitute for righteousness. But it does not mean this, because whenever *dia* means "because of its object is in the accusative case, and this never happens when "faith" is the object. When the Greek word for "faith" occurs with *dia*, it is always in the genitive case, and this is the case the object should be in when *dia* means "by" or "through," indicating that faith is a channel but not the grounds of salvation.

In order to spend a twenty-dollar bill you have to have faith in its purchasing power. But it is not your faith that is the basis of the purchase. It is the value of the money. So also spiritually.

Third, faith cannot be a substitute for righteousness because the important word "credited" does not permit that interpretation. The words (*hasah* in Hebrew, *logizomai* in Greek) are bookkeeping terms. They refer to accounting, a field in which the accountant has to be one hundred percent right. Suppose I am walking around with a dollar in my pocket, and I am aware that this is not very much money. I would like to have more. So I get out my account book and "reckon" one hundred dollars, rather than one dollar, to my account. According to my book I now have one hundred dollars. But this means nothing at all. It is foolishness. If I want to reckon one hundred dollars to my account, I must have one hundred dollars. Reckoning, accounting, or crediting is an acknowledgment or marking down of what is actually the case.

It is the same in justification—which leads to the proper understanding (not a misunderstanding) of this verse. When God saved Abraham he did two things, one negative and one positive:

1. He did what Paul quotes David as saying in verses 7-8 (a quotation of Ps. 32:1-2), namely, *God did not reckon his sin against him.* How so? It is not merely that God simply struck Abraham's transgressions from the ledger book of his life and then forgot about them, as if they could simply be discounted. God does not play imaginary games. True, he did remove the list of Abraham's sins from his ledger, but that was only because he had first transferred it to the ledger book of Jesus Christ. Jesus took the liability of those transgressions on himself and paid their price by dying for them. Abraham's sin was not reckoned to Abraham because it was reckoned to Jesus Christ instead.
2. In a parallel action, God then also *reckoned the righteousness of Christ to Abraham,* which is what Genesis 15:6 teaches. God took Christ's righteousness and wrote it in Abraham's ledger.

That is the only way anybody has ever been saved, and it is precisely what has happened for anybody who has been saved. It is true that there have been different degrees of understanding of what happened. The Old Testament saints understood less (although, as I will show in the next study, Abraham himself probably understood a great deal). New Testament saints understand more. But regardless of the degrees of understanding, the only way we or anybody else is saved is by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to our account.

Some Practical Points

At the beginning of this study I pointed out two difficulties some of today's readers may have with these teachings. I have tried to address them. But, in closing, I want to balance those with four practical and easy-to-understand applications.

1. *The importance of Scripture.* Paul has been taking three chapters of Romans to explain man's great need and God's perfect remedy for

that need in Christ. But here, at the point of proving and clinching his argument, he is ready to base everything he has said on just one Old Testament verse. One verse, followed by just one additional verse to establish the testimony of King David! Then, having stated the biblical teaching, Paul moves on. There is no need to speculate or argue further. For us, in the same way, any clear statement of the Bible should settle any matter to which the Bible speaks—at once and forever.

2. *The hopelessness of trying to be saved by good works.* Abraham was a good man, even a great man. He is a model of Old Testament piety. Yet Abraham was not saved by his works, nor *could* he be saved by them. If this man could not be saved by good works, it is certain that you and I, who are far less pious and godly than he was, cannot be saved by them.

3. *Confidence in the gospel.* The Lord Jesus Christ testified to Abraham's being a saved man, even speaking on one occasion of "Abraham's bosom" as a synonym for paradise or heaven. Abraham was saved! But if he was saved, not by some ability, godliness, or good works unique to him, but by the same gospel that is being preached today, then we can have a complete and utter trust in that gospel. It saved him. It will save us. It can save anybody.

4. Finally, *all this is proof of Christianity's timelessness and validity.* If Christianity were merely something founded by Jesus Christ some two thousand years ago, it might be interesting but it would have no more ultimate claim upon us than the dogmas of any other human religion. But if—though it was accomplished by Jesus Christ in history some two thousand years ago—it is actually the way of salvation established by God the Father in conjunction with his eternal Son before the world began and through which anyone who has ever been saved was saved, then it is an entirely different matter.

This proves the finality of Christianity as the only true faith. Says Barnhouse, "All other religions are the gropings of man after God. The faith that is in Christ is God's revelation of truth from himself, in the terms and in the manner he wished us to have the truth."

Chapter 52.
Faith Credited as Righteousness

Romans 4:3

Anyone who has ever spent time teaching in a religious setting has been asked certain familiar questions often asked of Bible interpreters and thought by the questioners to be either clever or unanswerable, in spite of the fact that they have been answered very well by many people many times:

"Where did Cain get his wife?"

"If God is both good and all-powerful, how come there is evil in the world?"

"What about the innocent pagans who have never had a chance to hear the gospel?"

After hearing such timeworn questions repeatedly, it becomes difficult to take many of them seriously. However, among these questions there is one at least which, whether or not it is asked seriously, is nevertheless important and thoughtful. It is: "How were people saved before the death of Jesus Christ?" The reason it is important is that it assumes some very true things about the gospel. It presupposes (1) the necessity of the death of Christ; (2) the importance of making the good news about his sacrificial death known to lost people; and (3) the need to believe in Jesus. It understands that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). Starting with these presuppositions, the questioner wonders how a person who lived before the time of Christ—

and who therefore could not have had an opportunity to hear about or believe on Jesus— could be saved.

How *were* people saved before the birth, life, and death of Christ? The answer is that they were saved in precisely the same way as people who have lived after those events. That is, they were saved by believing on Jesus. The Old Testament saints looked forward to his coming. We look back to it.

What Did Abraham Believe?

This question emerges in our study of Romans 4, for in this chapter Paul is proving, from the Old Testament, the gospel of salvation by grace through the work of Christ. He knows that his Jewish readers would consider the Old Testament and its teaching both true and binding. Therefore, if he can show that Old Testament figures such as Abraham and David were saved by the gospel he has been teaching, he has established his teaching conclusively. If Abraham was saved by faith in Christ, it follows that Christianity is true and there is no other way of salvation.

But how is the apostle to establish this point? He does so by direct appeal to the Old Testament, quoting Genesis 15:6 in reference to Abraham and (as we shall see in the next study) Psalm 32:12 in reference to King David.

We have already seen several important things about Genesis 15:6, which is quoted in Romans
4:3 as "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." We have seen that
"it" refers, not to Abraham's faith, but to the righteousness of Christ, which God credited to Abraham. We have seen this as a "bookkeeping" transaction. God took the sin of Abraham from the ledger book of Abraham's life and transferred it to the ledger book of Christ, who died for such sin. And he took the righteousness of Christ from Christ's book and transferred it to Abraham. We also saw that faith is the channel through which this happens.

It is like one's faith in money. You need faith in money's value in order to spend it, but your faith in its purchasing power contributes nothing to the money itself. The value of a twenty-dollar bill is in the bill (or the integrity of the government, which stands behind it), not in the faith of the one using the money. In the same way, the worth of salvation is in the work of Christ, though we must believe on him for that work to be personally effective.

But here comes the question. Genesis 15:6 says, "Abram [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Strictly speaking, the text does not tell us what Abraham believed. We are told of the ultimate object of his faith; that is, the Lord God. But we are left in the dark as to the specific content of God's revelation to Abraham. What did God tell him, and what did Abraham believe as the result of that disclosure?

When we look at the context we see a number of possibilities. Genesis 15:1 records that God told Abraham that he would be Abraham's "shield" and "very great reward." Was that what Abraham believed? God also told Abraham that he would have an "heir" that would come forth from his own body (v. 4). Was that the content of the revelation? Then God speaks of numerous offspring, like the stars of heaven (v. 5). Is that it? Or does the content of Abraham's belief go back even further to the point of God's original call to him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and go to a new land that God would show him, coupled with a promise of blessing to him and others (Gen. 12:17)?

If we had nothing more than Genesis 12 and 15 and Romans 4 to go on, we would have to conclude that Abraham's faith involved all of these—and perhaps things that are not even recorded. That is, we would conclude that Abraham was "credited" with righteousness on the basis of a complete and utterly trusting attitude to God. This is what Martin Luther seems to say in one place, writing, "The expression 'Abraham believed God' is equivalent to saying that he considered God truthful."

We would not be wrong in thinking this; it is part of the story. But there is more to say.

The Problem in Galatia

The interesting thing about Genesis 15:6 is that it is quoted at three places in the New
Testament—Romans 4:3 (our text), Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23—and one of these, Galatians 3:6, provides a well-developed answer to our question.

Some background is necessary. Paul had preached to the people of Galatia in southern Asia Minor, which we call Turkey, on his first missionary journey, described in Acts 13 and 14. He had taught them that salvation from sin does not come from keeping the law, or from any other form of good works or character, but from the work of Christ. He had explained that Christ died in our place, bearing the punishment for our sins, and that on the basis of his substitutionary sacrifice God now freely gives his own righteousness to believers. The Galatians understood this, believed it, were baptized, and began to live for Christ. God even worked miracles among them, according to Paul's explicit testimony (Gal. 3:5).

Sometime later—we do not know exactly when—certain Jews came to Galatia from Jerusalem and began to teach the Galatian Christians that it was not enough for them to have believed on Christ. They said it was necessary for them to believe in Moses as well. That is, they had to keep the law. Faith was all right, but they also had to be circumcised and begin to keep the ritualistic requirements of the old covenant if they were to be saved. They could be Christians, but they had to become Jews, too.

Paul was aghast when he heard of this, and the letter to the Galatians is his spirited response. It has three parts: a first part, in which he defends his apostleship, no doubt because it had been under attack by these harmful Jewish legalizers; a second part, in which he restates and argues for the gospel; and a third part, in which he shows the inevitable outworking of the gospel of grace in moral living. In the second and

chief part he argues that no one, not even Abraham, has been saved in any way but through faith in Jesus.

The Faith of Father Abraham

This is where Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, saying, much as he does in Romans, "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'" (Gal. 3:6).

Paul then adds these important words: "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:8-9, 13-14).

Paul's opponents would have argued that Abraham was saved by keeping the law and by being circumcised, but we know from Paul's teaching, both in Galatians and Romans, that he would have answered by reciting the historical sequence of events. The verse that says that Abraham was justified by faith is in Genesis 15. But circumcision is not introduced until years later, as recorded in Genesis 17. And the law was not given until the time of Moses, four hundred years after that. Since Abraham was declared to be a justified man *before* either the law or circumcision, it is certain that he was not justified on the basis of his conformity to either. "But," Paul's opponents would have countered, "if that is true, then Abraham could not have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ either. For Jesus was not born until an even later date. Abraham did not know of Christ. So how could he have been saved by faith in someone of whom he did not know? Clearly, faith in Christ is not essential for salvation."

At this point we get the real answer to our question. For Paul replies that, on the contrary, Abraham did know of Christ and that he looked

forward to his coming and trusted him as his Savior from sin. He makes three points that support this:

1. *Abraham believed the gospel* This means that Abraham believed God in regard to spiritual matters (Gal. 3:8). The content of the gospel, as Paul explains it in regard to Abraham, was that "'all nations will be blessed through you.'" This quotation is drawn from Genesis 12:3 (repeated in 18:18 and 22:18), from the very beginning of Abraham's pilgrimage. So Paul is saying that from the very beginning, Abraham's faith was not concerned with mere physical things like an earthly heritage or physical posterity, but with spiritual things, like the blessing of salvation to come upon himself, his descendants, and even other nations. It was faith in the gospel, the good news about salvation.

Understand, then, that Abraham's faith was a very high order. He heard the promise of the land and of an earthly seed. He believed those promises. But what really gripped his mind and heart was the spiritual promise of salvation for all nations. It was for the sake of this blessing, not merely a physical land or an earthly posterity (which he could have had in Ur as well as in Canaan), that Abraham left his father's land and people to go to the new land that God was to show him.

This is how the author of the letter to the Hebrews puts it: "He [Abraham] was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

2. *Abraham's faith concerned redemption.* This is a surprising thing to read, but it is what Paul writes: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.... in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus..." (Gal. 3:13-14).

"Redemption" is a rich word, as we know from our study of Romans 3:24. It is a commercial term, describing the way in which an object can be ransomed from the marketplace by payment of a price. We know the word chiefly as it is used in the pawn shop business. If you need money in a hurry, one way of getting it is to take an object of some value to a

pawnshop and leave it there, in exchange for a fraction of its worth in cash. Later, when you are better off and want to retrieve the object, you can go back to the pawnbroker and repay the money you were given (plus interest), and you will get it back, assuming the object has not been sold in the meantime.

"Redemption" was also used like this in ancient times, but mostly it was used of the redemption of slaves. Slaves were bought and sold in every marketplace of the ancient world. But a slave could be redeemed from slavery if someone was willing to pay a redemption price for him or her.

This is what Jesus did for us. Jesus delivered us from the bondage of sin at the cost of his own life—because he loved us. And that is what Abraham believed! Did Abraham really foresee and believe that? No doubt Abraham did not know as much as those who have lived after the time of Jesus Christ. Those who live on this side of the incarnation know in detail of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We have four gospels to draw this information from. But we must not be so ready to assume that Abraham knew little. Paul says that God "announced the gospel [to him] in advance" (Gal. 3:8), and Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). What is more natural than that Abraham looked forward to some work of God in delivering the fallen human race from sin's slavery?

3. *Abraham believed in the coming of Jesus Christ specifically.* This is the final point in Paul's description of Abraham's faith. For having argued that God had announced the gospel to Abraham in advance and that Abraham looked forward to the blessing of God as redemption,

Paul says, "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

When we check this out we find that the promise of blessing through a singular descendant of

Abraham was given on three occasions: Genesis 12:7; 13:15; and 24:7. Paul is saying that Abraham picked up on this, realizing that this amazing promise was not a promise of blessing through his descendants in some general way but rather a promise of blessing to be achieved by one specific descendant, who was Christ.

Abraham did not know his name, of course. But he was looking forward to the coming of this one individual, and it was through the channel of his faith in Jesus that God declared him to be a justified person.

Faith of the Faithful

We have been studying the faith of Abraham because he is the focus of Paul's attention in this section of Romans. But it is worth saying that the same point can be made about any of the other Old Testament believers. They would all have explained the hope of their salvation in the same terms.

Let's ask a number of them what they "discovered in this matter" (cf. Rom. 4:1).

Here is Adam. Let's start with him. "Adam, you were the first man, and we should assume from this that what you believed in regard to salvation is of value for us. What did you believe in this matter? Did you believe that you could be saved by your works? Or did you have an anticipation of the coming of Jesus Christ and ground your faith in him?"

Adam replies, "You know my sad story, how I sinned by eating of the forbidden fruit and how I carried the human race into sin and death as a result of my transgression. But if you know that, you also know how God appeared to me after my fall and announced the coming of a Savior who would crush the head of Satan, though he would himself be wounded in the process. I did not know who he was at that time, but I believed in him. And I expressed that faith by naming my wife 'Eve,' because she would be the one through whom the gift of spiritual life would come. 'Eve' means 'life giver.' We thought she would give birth to the Messiah. So we named her first son 'Cain,' meaning 'Here he is!' We

were wrong in that; it was many thousands of years before our line actually produced Jesus Christ. But we had the right idea, and we were credited with righteousness because of faith in Jesus."

Let's ask Jacob what he "discovered in this matter"—"Jacob, were you saved by your good works or by faith in the deliverer to come?"

Jacob replies, "I wasn't saved by my works—or by my ancestry either, even though I was the grandson of Abraham. I didn't have as much understanding as my grandfather. He was the spiritual giant in our family. But you will recall that as I lay dying I looked forward to the coming of the Savior and said, 'The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his' [Gen. 49:10]. I was saved because I believed what God said about that Savior."

Here is Moses. Let's ask him. "Moses, how were you saved?"

Moses replies that even he, the lawgiver, was saved by faith in Jesus Christ and not in any ability he might be supposed to have had to keep God's commandments. "The Lord told me, 'I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him' [Deut. 18:18]. I was saved because I believed that promise."

Our next witness is King David. "Tell us, David, you were called a man after God's own heart, weren't you?" "Yes," replies David.

"That means you tried to think and act as God does. Does that mean that you were saved by your own good works or obedience?"

David explains that he was an adulterer and murderer. "If I had been trusting my works, I wouldn't have had a chance. No, I was saved because I looked forward in faith to that one who God promised would sit upon my throne forever. I knew that a person who would rule forever was no mere man. He must be the Savior-God. I believed that and was saved by him."

What about Isaiah? Isaiah looked forward to the "man of sorrows" who would take our transgressions on himself: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6).

Daniel prophesied the coming of "the Anointed One" (Dan. 9:25).

Micah revealed that he would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2).

At the time of Christ, John the Baptist pointed from himself to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

God Wants to Be Believed

Now I ask the same question of you. On what basis do you expect to obtain salvation? What do you believe concerning Jesus Christ?

Some years ago Donald Grey Barnhouse, a former pastor of the church I now serve, was talking to a man about the gospel. The conversation had gone on for some time, and the man seemed to be in total darkness. Finally he said, almost in a tone of desperation, "But what does God want?

Tell me, what does God want?"

Barnhouse replied in what he believed was the given insight of the moment: "God wants to be believed. More than anything else God wants to be believed."

There was a moment of dawning wonder in the man's face, and then he said, "I think I see. After all, the honor of God is involved." He believed in Jesus Christ at that moment.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior? That is what God declares him to be. Abraham believed what God had revealed to him concerning Jesus Christ, and the righteousness of Christ was credited to Abraham as if it were his own. Adam, Jacob, Moses, David, John the Baptist— all believed the same thing. No one has ever been saved in

any other way. So I say, if you have not believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior, believe now. Today is always the day of salvation.

Chapter 53.
David's Testimony

Romans 4:6-8

It is a principle of Old Testament law, stated clearly in Deuteronomy 19:15, that a legal matter must be established by more than one witness. That verse says, "One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

As a former Pharisee and student of the law, the apostle Paul was undoubtedly well acquainted with that principle. In fact, he seems to be employing it in Romans 4:6-8, where he adds the testimony of King David to that of the patriarch Abraham to support his defense of the gospel of justification by the grace of God. Paul has already cited the experience of Abraham, and he will return to him again, for Abraham is referred to repeatedly throughout the remainder of the chapter. But now he brings in the witness of David, citing two verses from the magnificent thirty-second Psalm (vv. 1-2):

> "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
> Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

This is a very great testimony.

Greatest of the Kings

When we began our study of Romans 4, taking up the case of Abraham, I pointed out that, with the exception of Jesus Christ, Abraham is the single most important person in the Bible—and that all the other biblical figures, particularly those of the Old Testament, would

unquestioningly have looked to Abraham as their father in the faith. Abraham is a giant.

But this does not mean that David, to whose testimony Paul appeals now, was insignificant. David was the greatest of Israel's kings as well as the one who best embodied the nation's devotional spirit and longings, and those to whom Paul was writing would have had the highest possible regard for David also. James Hastings wrote in *The Greater Men and Women of the Bible*.

The David of Israel is not simply the greatest of her kings; he is the man great in everything. He monopolizes all her institutions. He is her shepherd boy—the representative of her toiling classes. He is her musician—the successor of Jubal and Miriam and Deborah. He is her soldier— the conqueror of the Goliaths that would steal her peace. He is her king—numbering her armies and regulating her polity. He is her priest—substituting a broken and a contrite spirit for the blood of bulls and rams. He is her prophet—presaging with his last breath the everlastingness of his kingdom. He is her poet—most of her psalms are called by his name.

It is hard for us to appreciate the Jews' special regard for King David unless we think of a person in whom the best qualities and achievements of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln are combined. And perhaps even that would not quite reach this man's stature.

Importance of the Negative

David is important in the development of Paul's argument in another way also, however, and it is this that makes his testimony particularly telling with us. The words Paul quotes are cast in a negative form, as contrasted with the words about Abraham, which are positive. Abraham was "credited" with righteousness—a positive wording of the justification principle. David speaks of the same principle negatively, even using the same terminology ("credited" means "counted"), saying, "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

This negative wording is important for presenting the gospel in our day, as I have indicated, because it speaks to where most people actually are in terms of their spiritual sensitivities.

Let me show what I mean by starting with the positive wording. The positive statement of the justification principle tells us how we can get right with God, which we obviously need to do. But the difficulty is that most people today do not actually feel a need in this area. Martin Luther did; it is what haunted him. He knew he was not right with God, and he anticipated a
confrontation with an angry God at the final judgment. God showed him that he could experience a right relationship with God through the work of Jesus Christ. But who feels the intensity of Luther's anguish today? A few people perhaps, but not many. Most people do not think of themselves as being in a wrong relationship to God. On the contrary, they assume that all is well between themselves and God—or at least it ought to be. So they do not feel a need for justification.

This is illustrated by what theologian R. C. Sproul speaks of as "justification by death." Several years ago Sproul tried out the initial question of the Evangelism Explosion program on his son, asking him, "If you should die tomorrow and appear before God at the gates of heaven, and God should ask, 'What right do you have to enter my heaven?' what would you say?"

His son replied, "I'd say, 'Well, I'm dead, aren't I?'"

The point seemed to be that all he needed to do to gain entrance to God's heaven is to die. The righteousness of Christ received by faith did not seem to enter into his son's thinking in the slightest.

Because so many people think or respond this way today, it is necessary to teach the doctrines of justification at length, as I have been trying to do in this exposition of Romans. Yet, when we come to the testimony of King David, just because it is cast in negative form, we come to something that does speak to our contemporaries. It speaks of

transgressions. It pictures these as a burden and contrasts them with the blessedness of the person who is freed through God's forgiveness.

This speaks powerfully to our contemporaries, because, as I know from my counseling, nearly everyone carries about the burdens of past sinful actions. Somewhere in the writings of Donald Grey Barnhouse there is a story from early in his ministry—he was about twenty years old at the time—in which a woman came to him for counseling about a terrible crime that had been hanging over her for decades. She was about sixty years old when she came to Barnhouse, and she had killed a man forty years before. He was a boarder in her parents' home, and one day he had abused her sexually. She was so outraged by this that she crept back into his room the next night and turned on the gas jet. The next day, when the police came to investigate the boarder's death, they ruled it an accident, judging that the wind had blown the flame out. Nobody knew what the woman had done, and she had carried the burden of this sin around with her for forty years.

I have never had anyone tell me about a murder he or she has committed, but I have been told enough terrible stories to know that nearly everyone carries around some guilt for past actions.

People have told me of some theft they have committed. Some have harmed other people, lying about them out of jealousy and ruining their chances for promotion, sometimes for marriage.

Others have contributed to the death of another person, not in a direct way (at least so far as what has been told to me), but by their neglect to do what might have saved the person's life or through carelessness—as in a traffic accident, for example. Men are haunted by dishonesty, even criminal acts, in business.

Women are haunted by the memory of an abortion, sometimes multiple abortions. They have been told that there is nothing to feel guilty about, that all they did was submit to "a surgical procedure." But in their hearts they know they killed their child. I have had women ask, "How can I be forgiven for what I did?"

How would you answer such a question?

Sometimes counselors try to reassure a person by suggesting that the action was all right or at least no more evil than what many other people have done. It is a way of "forgiving" the person, the counselor becoming a priest for the occasion. But many who have gone this route know that human forgiveness, while comforting and nice, is not enough. No mere human being can forgive another's sin, particularly if it is against a third party. The only forgiveness of any true value is God's forgiveness—what David is talking about when he writes, "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

This is what needs to be said to anyone who is conscious of the guilt of past sins. This is the only thing that works. It is the only thing that matters.

David knew the terrible burden of sin as a result of his transgressions. He had committed adultery with Bathsheba, another man's wife, and then he had arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed in order to cover up his sin. He "covered" it over, true. But the guilt of the act was still there. Why? Because David's cover-up was only a form of self-justification, and no one is able properly to justify himself. It was only when David knew his sin to be "covered" by the blood of Christ (v. 7) that he was freed from guilt and could rightly count himself blessed.

The Bliss of This Thought

Are you suffering from guilt for some past action? Does your mind return again and again to the wrong you have done? Is guilt an ever-present companion? If so, you need to experience what David knew as a result of God's grace in reference to his sin. He says three things about it:

1. *His sin was forgiven.* In the Bible there are a number of Greek words that are translated by our word "forgive" or "forgiveness," all with

special meanings. But the word that occurs here is *aphethēsan* (from the irregular verb *aphiēmi*), which means "to send off or "to send away." It is the word used in Matthew 13:36, where—in the King James Version—Jesus is said to have "sent the multitude away" so he could explain the parables of that chapter privately to his disciples. The idea is that of separation, and the bearing of the word upon the sin question is that it teaches that God is willing to separate the sinner's transgression and guilt from the sinner. We are not able to do that ourselves. When we humans punish a crime it is always by punishing the offender, simply because there is no other way of doing it. But God, for whom all things are possible, does separate the sin from the sinner, placing the sin upon Jesus Christ, where it is punished.

This is what the author of Hebrews was talking about when he said, "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people" (Heb. 9:28a).

It is what Peter intended when he wrote, "He himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness..." (1 Peter 2:24).

One of the ways the ancients sometimes punished the crime of murder was to bind the victim's corpse to the murderer so he was forced to carry about the decaying body of his victim until he himself was destroyed. It is a horrible picture, but a true portrait of what it means to bear the burden of one's sin and guilt. It was what Paul was perhaps thinking of when he cried out, later on in Romans, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24b). Who? Paul gave the answer in the very next verse: God alone through the atonement of Jesus Christ. And what bliss to be delivered! If you can keep the image of the decaying corpse in mind, you may begin to appreciate what it means to be separated from the corrupting influence of the sin you have committed and know the joy of forgiveness.

Horatio G. Spafford knew that joy and wrote movingly:

> My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought!— My sin, not in part, but the whole, Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

2. *His sin was covered.* This is a different idea from the thought of David's sin being forgiven, or "sent away," but it is not easy at first glance to determine what the term is getting at. The reason is simple. "Covered" (*epekalyphthēsan*) is one of that special class of words used only once in the New Testament. Obviously, then, the word was not common, and it would probably not even have been used by Paul here except for the fact that it was in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament text he is quoting.

However, the fact that the idea is drawn from the Old Testament gives us an important clue for interpreting it. For as soon as we ask, "Where in the Old Testament do we find the idea of the covering over of sin?" we immediately think of the work the high priest performed on the Day of Atonement. On that day the priest took the blood of a sacrifice, made moments before in the courtyard of the temple, and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat, the covering of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained the law of Moses, which everyone had broken. Without the sacrifice it is a picture of judgment. But when the broken law was covered by the blood of the sacrifice in this ceremony, God saw that an innocent victim had died in place of those who were guilty, his judgment was turned aside, and his love was released to save sinners.

I think this is what is involved here, and it is why I contrasted David's covering over of his sin with the entirely different "covering" provided by God. David's covering was merely a hiding or denying of his sin. God's covering was a true punishing of sin. It is because sin has actually and truly been punished in Christ that you and I, if we come to Christ, can find release from sin's burden.

If this is what David was thinking of, I find support for this interpretation of "covered" in the thought that the two ideas of sin being "taken away" and "covered" are illustrated by the two parallel acts of the priests of Israel on the Day of Atonement. "Covered" would refer to

the covering over of sin by blood sprinkled on the Mercy Seat. "Taken away" would refer to the ceremony performed earlier in the day, in which the sins of the people were confessed over the head of a goat (called the "scapegoat"), which was then driven away into the wilderness. This later rite pictured the removal of the people's sins from them.

3. *His sin was not counted against him.* The final word David uses of God's handling of his sin is the one we have chiefly been studying here: "counted," "credited," or "reckoned." This is a bookkeeping term, as we have noted, the point being that God would not list the sins of those he was saving in their own ledgers. How would we express this thought? We would probably say, "Happy is the person to whom God has given a clean slate." Or, "How wonderful to be able to start again with no black marks against you."

Perhaps that is too wonderful to be true! Is it? We think so if we think in human terms. But it is not "too wonderful" if we think as God thinks or trust what he says about the striking away of our transgressions.

God says, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34b). The psalmist declares, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12).

Those are great statements, but they are supported by the even greater truth that God has dealt with our sins at the cross of Christ. They have been punished there, and that is why they are removed from us as far as the east is from the west, and why they are remembered by God no more.

Never, Never

There is one more word in Paul's citation of David's testimony that deserves special consideration, because it contrasts so keenly with things human. It is the word *never,* which occurs in the sentence, "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will *never* count against him."

Never means never, and it must be taken at full value here, even though the opposite is almost always the case in human relationships. We all know the kind of forgiveness in which a person reluctantly accepts our apology and says that he will forgive us. But we know as he says this that he is not forgetting what happened, that our offense will linger in his mind and will probably be brought out against us in the future. Parents have a way of doing this with their children, never forgetting some foolish action they did years ago and periodically reminding them of it. We adults do it with one another, and it is harmful.

This text tells us that God is not like that. It tells us that once he has forgiven us for our sin through the work of Christ, he will *never, never* bring it up to us again. He will not bring it up in this life, never remind us of something in the past. He will always begin with us precisely where we are in the present. And he will never bring it up at the day of judgment. Why? Because it is truly forgiven. It will *never* be remembered anymore.

That is real "blessedness," which is the terminology David uses. And my concluding question is this: Why trade away that blessedness for the false blessings offered by this world?

The world does offer its blessings, of course. It is how it holds its victims. It offers material things chiefly, but it also offers intangibles such as a good reputation, success, happiness, and such items. Let me remind you that you can have all these things and more and still be miserable—if the burden of your sin is not lifted. David is an example. He was the king of a most favored nation. He had wealth and reputation. But the very psalm from which the verses we have been studying are taken describes what he was like before his sin was forgiven. He wrote that when he kept silent about his sin, trying to hush it up, "my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (Ps. 32:3-4). But because David found forgiveness with God, the burden of his sin rolled away, his strength was restored, and he could write: "Blessed is the man whose sin the

Lord will never count against him." I commend that very great blessing to you.

Chapter 54.
Salvation Without Ceremony

Romans 4:9-12

The human mind is a very subtle thing, and at no point is it more subtle than in trying to make excuses for its conduct. Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845) was an English clergyman who frequently missed morning chapel during his student years at Oxford. Chapel was at 7:00 A.M., but Barham was almost always up too late the night before. When he was reproached for his failure by his tutor, he excused himself by saying, "The fact is, sir, chapel is too late for me. I am a man of regular habits, and I can't sit up until seven in the morning. Unless I get to bed by four or five o'clock at the latest, I'm good for nothing the next day."

My favorite improvised excuse was made by Chico Marx of the famous Marx Brothers. When his wife caught him kissing a chorus girl, Chico explained, "I wasn't kissing her; I was whispering in her mouth."

The Example of Abraham

We remember from our study of the first verses of Romans 4 that in this chapter Paul is attempting to prove the gospel from the Old Testament. His chief example and the basis of the proof is Abraham, patriarch of the Jewish people and the one to whom they looked as their spiritual model. If Paul can show that Father Abraham was saved by the grace of God in Christ, received by the channel of human faith, he has made his point and established the doctrine. Paul shows that Abraham was saved through faith and not by works by quoting Genesis 15:6. That important text says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 3).

Having proved his point concerning Abraham, Paul then adds a second witness. This witness is David, and the words Paul cites in Romans 4:7-8 are a statement drawn from the thirty-second Psalm: "'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him'" (cf. Ps. 32:1-2).

The case should be clear-cut: Abraham was saved by faith apart from human works; we must be saved by faith, too. But here is where the excuse-making subtlety of the unbelieving mind enters in.

"But surely there must be more to it than that," objects the skeptic. "What about circumcision? I know you said earlier that circumcision is an external thing and that God looks not on externals, but on the heart. But, after all, Abraham *was* circumcised, wasn't he? And circumcision *was* given to Abraham by God. It has been practiced by Jews down through the many centuries since Abraham's time. That has to mean something. If it does, then it is not right to say that Abraham was saved by faith alone. He was at least saved by circumcision, too, or perhaps by it rather than by faith. If God gave circumcision, circumcision must be meritorious."

Today, in the same way, people would argue for the redeeming value of baptism or even the Lord's Supper. Jesus Christ gave both to us. Since he did, isn't it right to say that we are saved, at least in part, by the sacraments?

It should not require a degree in logic to see the error of these arguments. They state that if ceremonies are given by God, they must count for something, and if they do, they must be valuable for attaining salvation. But that does not follow. Just because "A" is valuable for "B" does not mean that it is necessarily valuable for "C," unless it can be shown that "B" and "C" are the same thing. If "A" equals "B," and "B" equals "C," then "A" also equals "C." But this is not true if "B" and "C" are different. That is the case here. Circumcision (or any other sacrament) does have value. Paul is going to explain circumcision's value as being a "sign" and a "seal" of the righteousness that is received

by faith. But this is not the same thing as saying that it is the ground on which a person receives that righteousness in the first place.

Paul's argument is even stronger than this, however. In these verses Paul asks when it was that Abraham was declared to be righteous by God. That is, when was he saved? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? If it was after, circumcision might be supposed to have entered into his justification in some way. It may have contributed to it. But if it was before, then—whatever circumcision signifies—it obviously does not enter into salvation and is not the basis on which Abraham or anyone else has been justified.

When was it? The answer is clear. As we have already seen in a previous study, Abraham was declared to be justified in Genesis 15:6, but we are not told he was given the sacrament of circumcision until Genesis 17, which describes a period of his life fourteen years later.

Therefore, since Abraham was not saved by circumcision, he can be cited as the father not only of Jews, who are circumcised, but of everyone, even those who are not. He is the father of the justified. Because he was circumcised, he is the spiritual father of those Jewish people who not only are circumcised but who have also believed on Jesus Christ. And because he was declared to be justified *before* he was circumcised, he is also the spiritual father of those who have not been circumcised but who, like believing Jews, have also believed in Jesus.

F. Godet says rightly of this teaching, "The apostle has succeeded in discovering the basis of Christian universalism in the very life of him in whose person theocratic particularism was founded." That is, the Jews had been basing their hopes of being saved as Jews on Abraham. But the example of Abraham actually proves that God saves people through Christ regardless of their origins.

Another writer says, "Paul has turned the Jew's boast upside down. It is not the Gentile that must come to the Jew's circumcision for salvation; it is the Jew who must come to a Gentile faith, such faith as Abraham had long before he was circumcised." Do you realize the importance of that?

If you are a Jew and are saved, it is not because you are a Jew. It is because of the work of Jesus
Christ. If you are a Gentile and are saved, it is not because of anything you are or have done as a Gentile. It is because of the work of Jesus Christ. No one is saved because he or she has been baptized or confirmed or gone to Mass or shared in the communion service. A person is saved through faith in the perfect and completed work of Christ. Either you have been saved by him, or you have not been saved at all. It is by faith and not by works that one is justified.

A God-Given Sign

There is a valid question still to be asked at this point, of course, and it is this: If Abraham was saved by faith apart from circumcision, which he must have been if he was declared to be justified fourteen years before circumcision was given to him, why was this rite given? If Abraham was not saved by circumcision, didn't the giving of circumcision just muddy the waters? Or, to put the question in other terms, what is the purpose of the sacraments anyway?

This is a good Bible passage from which to ask these questions, because it contains in one place (in fact, in one verse) the two most important words in the Bible for understanding what the sacraments are about. The words are: (1) "sign" and (2) "seal."

Let's take the word *sign* first. Paul writes that Abraham "received the sign of circumcision" (v. 11). What does that mean? Well, in simple language a sign is a visible object that points to something different from and greater than itself. To review what I noted in a previous study, here are some examples. If you are driving along the New Jersey Turnpike going north and see a sign that says, "New York 125 Miles," you understand that New York City is 125 miles ahead of you. The sign is not New York, but it points to New York. Though it is less than the city—much less—it is not without value.

Here is the other example: You are driving down a certain road and you see a sign over a diner that says, "Joe's Place." This sign does what the

sign in my first example does; it points to the diner as "Joe's Place." But in this case, the sign does something more as well. It indicates ownership; it shows that this particular diner is Joe's.

I use that example in addition to the first one because it introduces a second important element into this discussion. On the first level, the sacrament, being a sign, points to something different from and greater than itself. In the case of circumcision, it is a case of pointing to the covenant God established with Abraham based on the work of Christ. In the case of the New Testament sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is the same. The Lord's Supper in particular points back to Christ's death: "This is my body given for you..." and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19-20). But on the second level, these sacraments also indicate ownership. They show that we belong to Christ and that we no longer belong to ourselves.

Baptism especially does this, being an initiatory sacrament. Its whole meaning concerns ownership by or identification with Jesus. This is one reason why, under normal circumstances, baptism is to be a public rather than a private act. It is one important way by which believers are to testify before the world that they are Christ's. On the other hand, baptism is also a testimony to the believers themselves. For if times come into a believer's life, as they seem always to do, when the person begins to doubt whether he or she is actually saved or has been claimed by Christ, the memory of baptism can be an important means of the person's being reassured and strengthened in faith.

This was the case with Martin Luther. It has been reported of Luther that there were times late in his life when he was discouraged and seemed to be confused about everything, no doubt because of the strain and mental fatigue of being in the forefront of the Protestant Reformation in Germany for so many years. Luther questioned the value of the Reformation. He questioned his faith. He even questioned the work of Jesus Christ. But when those times came, we are told, Luther would write in chalk on the table two Latin words: *Baptizatus sum*! ("I have been baptized!"). That reality would strengthen him, and

he would remember that he really was Christ's and had been identified with him in his death and resurrection.

A Seal of Christ's Righteousness

The second word Paul uses to discuss the nature of the sacraments, whether circumcision, baptism, or the Lord's Supper, is "seal." He writes that Abraham's circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (v. 11).

What is a seal? We do not use seals very often today, but we have enough examples to illustrate their meaning and importance. Suppose you want to go abroad. You have to secure a passport issued by the government of the United States. You apply for it, submitting two recent pictures of yourself. When it comes you find that one of the photos has been affixed to the passport with a seal: the great seal of the United States. It is stamped into the passport in such a way that it is impossible to remove or alter the photo without damaging and thus invalidating the document. This seal indicates that the authority of the United States government stands behind the passport in affirming that the person whose picture appears there is a true citizen of the United States.

The other use of seals with which we are familiar is the affixing of these to a legal document by a Notary Public. The notary asks us to swear that the representations in the document are true and then affixes his or her seal to validate the transaction.

Sacraments operate in this way. In the case of Abraham, Paul says that circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." That is, after Abraham had believed God and God had imparted righteousness to him, God gave the seal of circumcision to validate what had happened. In the same way, baptism is a seal that the person being baptized has been identified with Jesus Christ as his disciple, and the elements of the Lord's Supper, when received, indicate that the person has taken Jesus to himself as intimately and as inseparably as eating bread and drinking wine.

Important?

Yes, the sacraments are important as signs and seals of what has happened spiritually and invisibly, *but not as a means of salvation.*

The Father of All

The last portion of our text teaches that because Abraham was saved by faith before he was circumcised, he has become the father of all who are truly saved, both Jew and Gentile. This does not mean that no one had been justified before Abraham. Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and other early believers were also justified by faith. But it does mean that in Abraham's case the way of salvation was made explicit in Scripture for the first time; therefore, all who have been saved trace their spiritual ancestry to him.

What a host of spiritual descendants this man had!

There are Jewish descendants, first of all. Abraham was followed in the faith by Isaac and then by Jacob. They were not the giants Abraham was. But each looked forward to the Messiah who would come, and God referred to himself by using their names, declaring himself many times to be "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

David is in that ancestry, as we have already seen. So were all the believing kings. The prophets were in this ancestry, too. Isaiah followed in the steps of Abraham when he trusted, not in his own good works or in his obedience to the sacraments, but in the One who was yet to come. So also did Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and all the minor prophets.

At the time of Jesus there were many who took their places in this line of Abraham's
descendants, people like Mary and Joseph, Anna, Simeon, and others. And then there at last was John the Baptist, who pointed to Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29).

The eleven disciples were among this group of believers: Simon Peter, James, John, Nathanael, Andrew, Philip, Matthew, and the rest. Later,

Paul joined their ranks, and Barnabas, and the early deacons of the church. So did John Mark, who wrote the second Gospel.

These were all Jews and were therefore in the great company of those "who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (v. 12).

What of those other spiritual descendants of Abraham, the Gentiles? At first this was only a trickle, like Israel itself once was. This stream grew slowly, but it contained people like Caleb, who became a member of the tribe of Judah but was originally a Kenizzite or foreigner. There was Rahab of Jericho and Ruth of Moab and Naaman, the Syrian general.

What about the Magi, who are introduced to us at the birth of Jesus? Are we to think that God brought them all the way to Jerusalem from their distant eastern homeland and then allowed them to return unconverted? They were Gentiles and uncircumcised, but they were brought to faith in the Jews' Messiah. These Gentiles saw the Lord Jesus Christ as a child and worshiped him.

During Christ's lifetime we are introduced to such believing Gentiles as the Syro-Phoenician woman and the centurion who approached Jesus on behalf of his paralyzed and suffering servant. Each of these was praised for his or her great faith. There is also, of course, the woman of Samaria.

Later, after the resurrection, Philip preached the gospel to a devout Ethiopian, and the Ethiopian believed. Then Philip went up the coast of Palestine, preaching in Gentile cities where, we may suppose, many more Gentiles believed. Peter took the gospel to the Roman soldier Cornelius, and was used to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles in an official way.

At Antioch the church grew among Gentiles particularly. Many of its teachers were Gentiles: Simeon called Niger (probably a black man), Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch). When the missionary journeys began, Paul picked up such uncircumcised believers as Luke, who was from Macedonia and who

later wrote the third Gospel and Acts, and Titus, who was not circumcised, although pressures were apparently exerted to have him be (cf. Gal. 2:3), and these men worked with him.

In the greetings appended to Paul's letters we discover the names of Gentiles who were added to the church, many through Paul's ministry—people like Apollos, Stephanus, Fortunatus, Philemon, Gaius, and Erastus, and the believing slaves Tertius, Quartus, and Onesimus.

These people were all uncircumcised, but Abraham became their father, too, since "he is the father of all who believe but who have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them" (v. 11).

A Spiritual Ancestor

The great British statesman William Gladstone (1809-1898) once visited an antique shop and was struck by a seventeenth-century oil painting he found there. It portrayed an aristocrat dressed in an old Spanish costume with a ruff, plumed hat, and lace cuffs. Gladstone wanted to buy it, but it was too expensive. Sometime later he visited the home of a rich London merchant and saw the portrait hanging on his wall. His host noticed him looking at the picture and said, "Do you like it? It is a portrait of one of my ancestors, a minister at the court of Queen Elizabeth."

Gladstone, who knew this was untrue, replied, "For three pounds less he would have been my ancestor."

I do not know who your ancestors have been, whether they have been worthy or quite undistinguished, or even whether you know who they are. But I do know this: You can step into the long ranks of the greatest honor roll of ancestors any human being could ever have and it will not cost you even a single cent—though it will cost you your pretensions. It is the ancestral line of Abraham. You need only believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, and this great company of the faithful will become your family tree.

Chapter 55.
The Steps of Faith

Romans 4:12

In Paul's proof of the gospel from the life of Abraham there is a phrase that is worth returning to, even though I have passed by it in the preceding discussion. That phrase is "footsteps of the faith." To walk in another's footsteps means walking in single file so that the ground covered by the leader is covered in turn by each follower. This suggests a journey, and it is for this that I return here to the footsteps idea. Sometimes we think of the Christian life only in terms of fixed, past decisions like being "born again" or "deciding for Jesus." There are times when decisions must be made, of course, and being born again does indeed happen only once in our lives. But we can go overboard with such an approach, thinking that, if these decisions have been made or these experiences have happened to us once, there is very little to be expected from then on. Actually, those events are only a beginning of the Christian life, and true Christianity is more like a pilgrimage in which every step is to be taken by faith and in the same direction, the direction marked out for us by Abraham.

Abraham was a pilgrim throughout his entire life, and we are to be also. Like him, we are to live "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

The Obedience of Faith

Abraham's faith is measured by several clearly defined steps, and it is useful to look at each in turn. The first was his calling by God and his response to that call while he was in Ur of the Chaldeans. This is recounted in Genesis 12:1-9 and is referred to in Hebrews 11: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (v. 8).

There are two important things about this initial step in Abraham's faith-pilgrimage. First, it was initiated entirely by God. Abraham did not seek God of himself any more than we do. In fact, Abraham was a worshiper of false gods and at the start had no appreciation of the true God at all (cf. Josh. 24:2). He was in the category of those who have repressed the truth lest the knowledge of the true God spring up to force a change of allegiance in their lives and a reordering of their lifestyles. The fact that Abraham did follow after the true God was due solely to God's initiative.

Nothing could be clearer than this from the verses in Genesis 12 that describe God's call (vv. 1-3, 7). They contain seven great "I will"s.

1. "I will show you [a land]."
2. "I will make you into a great nation."
3. "I will bless you."
4. "I will make your name great."
5. "I will bless those who bless you."
6. "I will curse [those who curse you]" and later, after Abraham had reached Canaan,
7. "I will give [you] this land."

In no case does Abraham do anything to merit the appearance of God to him. Nor does he contribute anything to the promises God utters. It is a matter of election, pure and simple, as in our own salvation.

"But surely Abraham did something?" someone queries. That is true, of course, and it is the second important thing about Abraham's initial step of faith: Abraham obeyed God (Heb. 11:8). But notice, this came after God's commands and was provoked by it. God told Abraham, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (v. 1), and Abraham did. The text says, "So

Abram [Abraham] left, as the LORD had told him..." (v. 4). This is why Hebrews refers to this step as obedience.

We would think about the Christian life more accurately than we do if we would learn to think of our own responses to God in this way. And our presentation of the gospel would be more accurate, too. The way we usually present the gospel suggests that we think of becoming a Christian as a work of ours—"deciding for Jesus" or "letting Jesus into our hearts." But that makes it all man-centered. It would be better if we thought of faith simply as obedience to what God tells us to do.

To Be a Pilgrim

The second stage of Abraham's walk of faith concerns his early years in the Promised Land. In one sense, Abraham had arrived. He was now where God had sent him. But, at the same time, Abraham knew that he was only a pilgrim in this earthly land, since his true goal and inheritance from God was in heaven. The author of Hebrews makes this plain by saying, "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God" (Heb. 11:9-10).

We have a hymn in English that uses the pilgrim image, but in a way that suggests a wrong idea.
It states:

> A pilgrim was I, and a wand'ring,
> In the cold night of sin I did roam,
> When Jesus the kind shepherd found me, And now I am on my way home.
>
> John W. Peterson, 1958

That is a pretty rhyme, of course, and it is true for the most part. But its use of the word *pilgrim* suggests that this is what we were before Jesus

found us and that now we are no longer pilgrims. Actually a pilgrim is what we have become.

To be a pilgrim, two things must have happened to us. First, *we must have left home.* Abraham did that. God told him to leave his country, his people, and his father's household. Similarly, we are called to leave our past to follow Jesus. This is why Jesus told us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow him (cf. Luke 9:23). It is why he said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Of course, the One who taught us to love one another was not teaching us literally to hate members of our family. Rather, he was teaching that all lesser loyalties must be subordinated to our loyalty to him. We must turn our backs on anything that would keep us from one-hundred-percent discipleship.

And that is the second characteristic of a pilgrim: *discipleship*, or *following after Jesus.* A person who has merely left home is not a pilgrim. He is a vagrant, a drifter. To be a pilgrim, a man must have his eyes on the goal to which he is moving.

This does not mean that a Christian cannot have warm human friendships. In fact, Christian friendships will be greater and deeper than those of non-Christians, if only because people will have become more valuable than things to a Christian. And speaking of "things," living the pilgrim life does not mean that Christians cannot also have a reasonable share of earthly riches.

Abraham, though a pilgrim, became a rich man. He had flocks and herds and servants. Yet he was a pilgrim still. Why? Donald Grey Barnhouse answers:

[Because he left] his native land and [began] to walk with God, everything he owned was now held in the reality of its true and eternal value. Nothing was held for any intrinsic worth. Henceforth all that was touched or possessed was looked upon as a gift from God—of value if it enhanced the glory of God and brought the Lord nearer to the heart,

and of no value at all if it caused the light of God to grow dim and the memory of the glory to fade.

I am sure that God wants some who are following this study to be more truly pilgrims for God than they have ever been. You may complain that you have too many worldly matters to worry about—a job, a home, a mortgage, and such—and that you are too old to take a rigorous following of Jesus Christ seriously. If that is what you are thinking, consider Abraham. He had many possessions even when he started out from Haran (Gen. 12:5), but they did not stop his pilgrimage. Moreover, Abraham was already seventy-five years old (v. 4). He lived to be one hundred and seventy-five. Even by the life-expectancy standards of his day, he was already what we would call middle-aged when God called him.

How about you? If you are following in the footsteps of Abraham, doesn't God want you to be a true pilgrim?

God of the Impossible

The next stage of Abraham's faith-journey is a great one, but I will not take much time to discuss it now, since it is brought into the story just a few verses further on in Romans (4:18-22). We will consider it in full when we get to that passage, for it is a most important part of the picture.

God had promised Abraham that he would have numerous descendants, as numerous as the stars in heaven (Gen. 15:5). Yet, although Abraham was seventy-five years old when he started out for Canaan, eleven more years passed and he and his wife, Sarah, remained childless. It became a great problem for them—an embarrassment, of course. But more than that, it was a spiritual problem, since God's promise of a deliverer from sin was wrapped up in his promise of a son from Abraham's "own body" (v. 4). Abraham and Sarah's hope was set on this promise, as it should have been. Yet for all those long years no son was born to them.

We know the story. The matter became so unsettling to Sarah that she gave her servant girl, Hagar, to Abraham to see if he could raise up an heir through her. Hagar did conceive. The child was Ishmael. But this was not God's doing, and God later appeared to tell Abraham that he had not forgotten his promise and that the son long anticipated would be born within the year.

At this point Abraham was ninety-nine years old and Sarah was eighty-nine. Earlier, when
Ishmael had been conceived, the act of intercourse was by Abraham's own physical strength. Now he was past the age of engendering a child, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. If there was to be a child at this stage, a miracle was required. But this is precisely what Abraham was enabled to trust God for. That is why the author of Hebrews writes, "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore" (Heb. 11:11-12).

It is why Paul says in Romans, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:18-21).

Do you have a faith like that? Faith in the "God of the impossible"?

I admit that this is a very high example of faith, which is why it is so often referred to favorably in the New Testament. But I maintain that in essence this is the same faith we should have—if we are true Christians. The God we worship is the God of Abraham, after all, and God is in the business of bringing forth faith like this in all those who know him. God brings life out of death. Your own conversion is an example! He brings

love out of hate, peace out of turmoil, joy out of misery, praise out of cursing, and miracles to those who trust him. Many can testify to these wonders personally if they have been following in the footsteps of Abraham.

In Search of Understanding

The author of Hebrews ends his overview of Abraham's walk of faith with a fourth incident, and, taking my clue from him, I end with this account, too. It concerns Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son on Mount Moriah. The text says, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Heb. 11:17-19).

To appreciate this story we must review the previous one, remembering that Isaac had been born to Abraham in his old age and that he had been identified specifically as the son of God's promise. That is, he was the one through whom the Messiah was to come.

Because Isaac had been born so late in Abraham's life, and Abraham had come to love him greatly, the call to sacrifice him was at the very least a test of Abraham's devotion to God. Had Isaac grown too dear to Abraham? Had he begun to take the place of God in the aged patriarch's affections? The Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee thought so and wrote that "Isaac represents many gifts of God's grace. Before God gives them our hands are empty. Afterwards they are full." As a result, when God reaches out his hand to take ours in fellowship, we have no hand to give him and the things that have filled our hands must go. "Isaac can be done without," Nee wrote, "but God is eternal."

Isaac may have begun to take the place of God in Abraham's thinking, though we cannot be sure of that. The Bible does not teach it. But one thing the Bible does teach is that the testing of Abraham was spiritual and that it involved Abraham's perception of who God is and whether or

not the aged patriarch would continue to trust him as the only truthful God.

In my more extensive study of this incident in *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary,* I have written:

The problem was not merely that Abraham loved Isaac. That was true enough. What was even more important was that God had promised that all future blessings, including the blessing of salvation, were to come through Isaac. God had told Abraham that Isaac was to live, marry, and have a family, and that from that family there would come one who would be the deliverer. Now God says that Isaac is to be sacrificed, and for the first time in all

Abraham's experience with God he is confronted by a conflict between God's command and God's promise. Earlier, Abraham had been tested as to whether he would believe that God could do the seemingly impossible task of giving Abraham and Sarah a son. That was a test, but it was not as hard as this one. This test involved a conflict apparently within the words of God himself. God had *promised* posterity through Isaac. But God had now also *commanded* Abraham to kill him.

How could this problem be resolved? There were only two ways. Abraham could have concluded that God was erratic, wavering from one plan to another because he did not know his own mind. This had not been Abraham's experience of God. The long wait for the son had taught him better than that. Or Abraham could have concluded that, although he—being finite and sinful—was unable to see the resolution of the difficulty, God could nevertheless be trusted to have a resolution, which he would certainly disclose in due time. This was the harder of the two solutions to accept, but Abraham's experience of God led in this direction.

Abraham acted in a manner consistent with his knowledge of God. That is, he trusted him, concluding that whatever God's purposes may or may not have been in this situation, God had at least shown that he could not be his enemy. God was his friend.... So Abraham believed God and acted, even though he could not understand the solution to the difficulty.

Did I say "could not understand the solution to the difficulty"? Perhaps in the fullest sense. But the power of the story comes from the fact that Abraham *did* come to understand it somewhat. In other words, it was a case of what Anselm of Canterbury described centuries later by the words

"faith in search of understanding."

It must have gone something like this: Abraham must have reasoned, "God is no liar. He told me beyond any question that I would have a son, and I have had one, though in my old age. Isaac stands beside me now. He is a proof of God's faithfulness. But God has also said that Isaac will have children through whom the Messiah will come. Isaac is not married. He has no children. If I put him to death, the promises of God cannot be fulfilled. Here is a contradiction. But there are no contradictions in God. This is a foundational truth. What must I conclude then? Since I am commanded to sacrifice Isaac and since, at the same time, God cannot be unfaithful to himself, the only solution I can imagine is that God is going to do a miracle and bring Isaac back from the dead. There will have to be a resurrection."

But, Abraham, there has *never* been a resurrection in the whole history of the world!

"That does not matter," Abraham replies. "A resurrection is compatible with the nature of God. Since God is the author of life, it would be a small matter for him to bring life back into a dead body. But the one thing God cannot do is lie. God must tell the truth. He must keep his promises. Therefore, I expect a resurrection."

Apparently, Abraham really did expect a resurrection, for when he got to the base of the mountain he told his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we [plural!] will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5). In other words, Abraham fully intended to sacrifice his son in obedience to God. But he expected that God would then raise Isaac from the dead so that he and the boy could return home together.

This is true faith. It is faith in search of understanding.

Obedience from First to Last

There is one more thing. At the very end of the account, after Abraham has proceeded to the point of binding Isaac and raising his knife and God has intervened to stay his hand and provide a ram as a substitute, the angel of the Lord speaks to praise Abraham. But what Abraham is praised for—notice this, it is of great importance—is not his perception in figuring out God's plan or even the magnitude of what we might call his "blind faith," but his *obedience.* It is how the story ends. The angel speaks for God again, saying, "Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Gen. 22:18b).

That is where the story began, too—with Abraham's obedience in leaving his own land and setting out for Canaan. Faith begins with obedience. Faith ends with obedience. It is a matter of obedience from the very first to the very last, until we appear before God and see him face to face.

If you are in Abraham's line, if you walk in his footsteps, you must obey God in all things. It is through obedience that faith grows.

Chapter 56.
Salvation Apart from Law

Romans 4:13-17

During my years of formal education, when I had scores of books to read for classes, I developed a way of looking at the assigned texts that helped me get through them. I regarded the fifteen or twenty books for one course and the dozen or so books for another course as enemy soldiers that had to be shot down before I could win the war. Each time I finished a book I would say, "There's another dead soldier."

I mention this now because there is a sense in which the apostle Paul, too, has been shooting down enemy soldiers. In Romans 4 his war is for the gospel, of course, and the champions that have been sent to do battle against him have been formidable. Thus far there have been two of them. The first was "Works." This is the soldier almost everyone believes in, the people's favorite. But Paul shot him down with an arrow from Genesis 15:6, which proved that Abraham was justified by faith in God's promise, rather than by works. Since Abraham is the Old Testament pattern of a justified and godly man, his experience sets the pattern for those who follow him.

The second soldier was "Circumcision." This champion was peculiar to the Jews and seemed to have the blessing of God behind him, since, after all, God had himself established circumcision. Paul defeats this mighty foe by showing that Abraham was declared to be justified by God years before circumcision was imposed on him and his descendants.

The last of the enemy's heroes is "Law." Paul will shoot this soldier down in the next two paragraphs of his letter (vv. 13-17).

An Additional Argument

It is important to notice his change in strategy, however. When Paul was arguing against circumcision as a way of salvation, he used a temporal or historical argument, as we have seen. He showed that Abraham is said to have been justified when he was about eighty-five years old (cf. Gen. 15:6), but that he was not given the rite of circumcision until he was ninety-nine, about fourteen years later (cf. Gen. 17). Since Abraham was declared to have been justified *before he* was circumcised, the rite of circumcision could not have been the basis of his justification.

That type of argument could also have been used at this later point in the text, in reference to the giving of the law of God to Israel. In fact, in a similar discussion in his letter to the Galatians, this is precisely what Paul does. He says, "The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away

with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise" (Gal. 3:17-18). As an argument from history, the denial of the law's role in salvation is even stronger than the denial of circumcision's role, for the law was given through Moses more than four centuries after Abraham's day, while circumcision was given only fourteen years after the patriarch was said to have been justified.

But Paul does not use this argument in Romans 4. Instead he speaks of the results of trying to live by law, showing that by nature law is contrary to both faith and promise and that the inevitable result for those who choose this bad option is God's wrath.

Why does Paul take this approach? Why does he not argue from a time sequence, as he does in Galatians? It may not be possible to assign a sure reason for this, but we have a clue in the fact that Paul does not use the direct article ("the") before the occurrences of the word *law* in verses 13-15, whereas, by contrast, the article does occur with "law" in Galatians. We remember that the situation in Galatia was one in which Jewish believers were trying to force the Old Testament law on Gentiles, requiring them to be circumcised and take on other specifically Jewish obligations. In that context it was right for Paul to speak of "*the* law," meaning the law of Moses. In Romans it is different. Here Paul is not thinking so much of the specific Jewish law, though nothing he says excludes it, but of law in general. It is the law *principle*, rather than a specific set of laws, that he is thinking about. It is what we commonly call morality.

Is that distinction important? Well, it is for Gentiles, which includes most of us, as well as the bulk of those to whom Paul was specifically writing. The Gentiles of Paul's day generally did not have the advantage of the Old Testament law for moral guidance. But they did have some standards of behavior, just as we do today. And, like us, they wanted to trust in their personal ability to keep that "law," to measure up to those standards, as a way of salvation.

We see that all around us, don't we? And in ourselves, too. People will say that God ought to save them because they have done the best they can, "best" in that statement being defined by their partial attainment of whatever standard they perceive to be a just one. Or because they are good people, "good" being merely the sense that they have done better at living up to some moral code than others.

You will recall from our study of Romans 2:12-15 how C. S. Lewis pointed out that in most arguments we all naturally appeal to some standard, maintaining that the other person has failed to live up to that standard and implying that *we* have. Lewis calls this the Law of Nature, and his point is that there must be a God behind it from whom all such standards of right come. However, this tendency is also evidence of the way we naturally think about salvation. Because we think we have measured up to some moral standard, we believe that God owes us something.

In my opinion, it is because of this universal human error that Paul approaches the third "soldier"—not as if the warrior was clothed in the armor of the law of Moses, but as if he was posing as the moral champion of all mankind.

Because Ideas Have Consequences

Each month I get a newsletter from a think tank in Washington, D.C., which has as its slogan:
"Because Ideas Have Consequences." That is true, of course. So, taking my clue from that paper, I ask, as Paul obviously did in writing these verses: What are the consequences if a person tries to achieve a saved status with God not by faith but by morality or, as Paul says, by the law principle?

Paul says there are three consequences:

1. *Faith has no value* (v. 14). The reason faith has no value if one is living by the law principle is that faith and law are opposites, and if a person is choosing one, he or she is inevitably rejecting the other. It is as impossible to be saved by *both* faith and works as it

is to be setting out from Kansas in the direction of California and New York simultaneously.

Here is an example. Quite a few years ago Donald Grey Barnhouse, a former pastor of the church I now serve, produced a gospel film entitled "The Geography of Salvation." It was based on the fact that in the continental United States both the highest point (Mount Whitney) and the lowest point (Death Valley) are in California. Barnhouse compared the state of California to our lost state as sinners and showed that it is impossible to get out of California by going up. A person who starts in Death Valley and travels up to sea level and then on into the mountains may feel that he has made noticeable progress, and he has in terms of elevation. But he is still in California. Similarly, in regard to salvation, what we need is not a higher moral elevation but a change of state. We need to be moved out of our lost state, in which we are under the wrath of God, into a saved state. That is different from going up and by a different means entirely.

To put it another way: Law is man-directed (it points to human abilities), while faith is Goddirected (it points to God's accomplishments). So, if you are approaching salvation by trusting man, you cannot be trusting God—and vice versa.

2. *The promise is worthless* (v. 14). The second consequence of living by the law principle is the nullification of God's promise. Why is this so? Well, if the promise of salvation is linked to the law principle, this can only mean that it is necessary for a person to keep the law in order to receive the promise. Of course, God *could* have made this his plan, but it would have meant that the promise was conditional. It would have been as if God had said, "I promise to save you if you will do so and so." But if that were the case, the promise would never have been fulfilled because, as Paul has already proved in the earlier chapters of Romans, there is nobody who has ever done what God's law requires. Not only that, there is nobody who has ever done what *any* law requires. For whenever a person says, "This is my standard," no sooner has he erected that standard than he breaks it. This would exclude him from salvation,

if salvation were based on that fulfillment. The promise could exist, but it would be worthless in terms of saving anybody.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it like this: "Law means failure. Therefore, if the promise had been made through the medium of the Law, what God was giving, as it were, with his right hand, he would have been taking back with his left hand. There would have been no promise at all; it would have had no value whatsoever."

3. *Law brings wrath* (v. 15). The third consequence of trying to achieve a saved status by the law principle is that, instead of achieving salvation, all one actually achieves is wrath. This is an important point, for it goes beyond what has already been established as the first and second consequences. Those consequences tell what a person trying to saved by law *fails* to achieve: he fails to achieve the promise. This point tells us what he actually does achieve: it is wrath.

This is because the law can do nothing but condemn. That is its very essence. The law says, "Do this, and if you do not do it, the punishment is as follows." The law possesses nothing that can enable a person to meet its just demands. Does that mean that the law is evil? Paul asks that question later on in his letter (in Romans 7), answering, "Certainly not!... the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:7, 12). A mirror is not a defective mirror because it cannot clean your face. That is just not its job. The function of a mirror is to show you that your face is dirty so that, when you know it is dirty, you will get some soap and water and wash it. In the same way, the law is not bad (defective) because it cannot save you. That is not its function. The law was given to show you that you cannot get to heaven by keeping it, so that— having learned that you cannot keep the law and will be condemned if you try—you will turn to Jesus Christ and be saved by him.

If you do not turn from law as a way of salvation and trust the work of God in Jesus Christ, the very standard that you trust condemns you—because you have not kept it and never will.

What does Paul mean when he adds, "Where there is no law there is no transgression" (v. 15)? This could mean the obvious: If there is no law, there can be no transgression of that law. But in the context it probably means: Without the law we do not know we are transgressors. As he says later, "... I would not have known what sin was except through the law..." (Rom. 7:7).

So, then, there is nothing wrong with law. The problem is in us, and it is the law's sole function to bring that truth to our attention.

A Better Set of Consequences

If you look closely at the New International Version, you will notice that the verses we are studying divide into two paragraphs. This is a proper division. The first paragraph, the one we have been looking at so far, is negative. It deals with the bad consequences of trying to be saved by the law principle: devaluation of faith, nullification of the promise, and wrath. The second paragraph, the one we turn to now, is positive. It shows the fortunate consequences of seeking to be justified by God, not on the basis of morality or by the law principle, but by faith—which was the path pursued by Abraham.

Again, as in the case of law (but on the other side of the ledger), there are three consequences.

1. *Faith establishes grace* (v. 16). Why is this so? It is because faith and grace belong together by their very natures, just as works and law belong together. This is very evident in the latter case. Law tells us what we are to do. It points to deeds, action, conduct, and behavior. You cannot think of law without thinking of requirements. In the same way, though by contrast, as soon as you think of faith you inevitably think of grace (if you understand it), and as soon as you think of grace you think of faith. Grace is the unmerited favor of God apart from human works, and it comes to us by simple acceptance, which is faith.

Suppose I agree to work for you for a day for forty dollars. At the end of the day's work I come to collect my wages. Would you claim that you are being gracious in paying me? Not at all. Your payment would not be a matter of grace but of obligation. If I have done the work, you owe me my wages. If, on the other hand, I am sick and out of a job and having financial troubles and you come and offer me forty dollars, that is grace. It has nothing to do with anything I have done or will do. I have only to receive your gift and thank you for it.

Faith establishes grace. Therefore, we must have faith, since it is grace we need.

2. *Faith makes salvation certain* (v. 16). Again, we can see the truth of this by contrast. Suppose salvation were based on our ability to keep some law or live up to some standard of morality. I read in Robert Bellah's study of American mores, *Habits of the Heart*, of a man whose basic moral standard was honesty. Let's take that as a test case. If salvation depends upon our being honest, how honest do we have to be? Here is a very honest man. Let's let him into heaven. Now, here is another man. He is almost as honest as the first, but he has told one more lie than the man we admitted. Should we let him in? If so, how about a man who has told one more lie than that or ten more lies than that? How about a man who is only moderately truthful? Or a man who is quite dishonest? Where do you draw the line? Obviously, in an imperfect and intricately variable world, it is impossible to draw such a line. So anyone who wants to be saved by works can never be certain that he or she has performed well enough—assuming (wrongly) for a moment, that the standard can be less than utter perfection.

And it is the same for any other moral trait: purity, contentment, charity, or whatever. How pure? How content? How generous do you have to be?

If, by contrast, salvation is not by morality but by the grace of God received through faith, then salvation is certain—because God is faithful and does not waver in his promises. He has done what is

necessary through the death of Christ. That work is a perfect and all-sufficient work. Nothing can be added to it. Consequently, the person who rests on that work can be quietly content and confident.

Here is a particularly good way of putting it from the pen of Donald Grey Barnhouse:

The law is the womb of doubt, and anyone who is attached to the law or its works is going to be besieged by all of the doubts which are born from the law. Any individual who has his eyes upon himself will be miserable. The man who walks by the law walks in the night, and his footsteps echo against the wall of the darkness that goes with the law. These echoes rise to his ears, and each sound from all the troop of doubts gives him fear upon fear. If he pauses, he is in the silence of dread fears, and as he runs from them his footsteps echo all the faster with the increasing tempo of his hysteria of doubt....

But the man who walks by the promise of grace walks in the broad day. His footsteps echo against the light of the promises of God, and he feels himself to be surrounded by the angels of blessing. His eager steps press forward to claim the blessings, and the increasing tempo of his footsteps sets up the echoes of further blessings. If he stops, he finds himself in green pastures and beside still waters. When he walks again he is in the paths of righteousness. He hastens on to the golden city, and the brightness of its prospect takes away any sense of fatigue that might naturally rise from the length of the road. And when the road ends, he finds that he has been supplied with grace at every step and brought on to the triumph of life eternal.

3. *Faith opens the door of salvation to all* (vv. 16-17). The final benefit of faith as the way of salvation is that it opens the door of salvation to everybody, not just to the Jew, who possessed the Old Testament law, or to the few favored Gentiles who had been taught a particularly high standard of morality. It is open to anyone. All may enter. Whoever will may come. This is the point Paul particularly emphasizes in Romans 4, not only in these verses but from verse 9 virtually to the end of the chapter.

I do not know of any human benefit or award or promise of which that can be said, because all human offers have conditions and thereby always exclude some people. There are certain benefits of being an American citizen (or a citizen of some other country), benefits provided by the government. But they are not for those who are not citizens. There are promises that companies make to their employees, but they apply only to those who work for those companies.
Labor unions provide securities for their members, but not for other workers or for management. Any human association has built-in limitations.

But this is not true of the way of salvation offered by God through the work of Christ. Because of this, I can say the door is open for you, regardless of who you are or whatever you may have done or not done. If you are a Jew, the gospel is for you. If you are a Gentile, it is for you. It is for those who are good and those who are bad. It is for scholars as well as for the uneducated. It is for religious people and for those who have no religious background whatsoever. None of these things enter into the picture, because we are all reduced to the same level. *Salvation is by the grace of God through faith.*

If you are excluded, it is only because you have refused to walk through that open door. It is because you prefer your own sullied morality to God's grace.

Do not let that be true of you. Instead of refusing grace, accept it and enter into the full joy of God's salvation. That salvation is for you, whoever you may be—if you will have it.

Chapter 57.
The Nature of Abraham's Faith

Romans 4:18-22

Any journey, whether it is geographical or metaphorical, has milestones at which the traveler stops, looks back over the ground already covered,

and takes satisfaction in his or her progress before moving on.

We have come to such a milestone in our study. For four chapters the apostle Paul has been laboring up the first great peak of the Himalayan range that is his letter to the Romans. He has analyzed the desperate state of the human race in its rebellion against God and has unveiled the answer to its lost condition in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has explained the nature of that gospel and has patiently answered all the objections that could possibly be brought against it. He has demonstrated that the gospel of a righteousness from God received by faith is taught in the Old Testament, proving it from the cases of Abraham and David. He has concluded that "the promise [of salvation] comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring..." (v. 16). The first four chapters of Romans have been an invigorating climb, and the peak Paul has scaled is a mighty one.

The apostle is now going to discuss the immediate benefits of this God-given salvation and the nature of the resulting Christian life. But, before he moves on to this next great pinnacle, he takes a look back over the ground he has covered and reviews his accomplishment.

He does this in three parts. First, having proved that Abraham was saved by faith (and therefore all other saved people must be), Paul reviews the nature of that faith, using Abraham as an example. (This is the part we will be looking at in the present study.) Second, since the essence of true biblical faith is that it is grounded in God, Paul reviews the character of God, showing that only the true God is an adequate basis for faith. (We will be dealing with that in the next study.) Finally, having explored these matters in regard to Abraham, who has been his chief example of the way of salvation, Paul breaks away from Abraham and speaks about the Christian faith directly, focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Our study of that faith will conclude the first volume of my commentary on Romans.)

In reviewing the nature of Abraham's faith, Paul highlights five of its most striking characteristics.

Faith in God's Promise

The first important thing about Abraham's faith is that it was faith in God's promise. That is clear in verse 18, where one expression of the promise from Genesis 15 is quoted. But it is also a dominant theme throughout the latter half of Romans 4, in which the noun *promise* appears four times (in vv. 13, 14, 16, 20) and the verb *promised* once (in v. 21). God made a multifaceted promise to Abraham, involving personal blessing, a land to be given to him and his posterity, blessing on his descendants, and a Redeemer to come. Therefore, the first and most important characteristic of Abraham's faith is that it was faith in this promise.

When we first look at this, the fact that Abraham "believed" God may seem obvious and therefore unimportant. But it is neither obvious nor unimportant.

It is not "obvious," because most of our natural thinking about faith moves in different categories entirely. What do we chiefly think of when we think about faith? We think in subjective terms, don't we? We think of our feelings about something, which really means that we are mancentered in this area rather than God-centered.

Occasionally, when I want to see what others have said about a certain subject, I look in various books of quotations in my library. When I did that in reference to "faith," I found that the quotations made this point dramatically. Here are some that appear in *Roget's International Thesaurus.* The Roman poet Ovid (43 b.c.-a.d. 18) said, "We are slow to believe what hurts when believed." The epic poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.) wrote, "They can because they think they can." The Roman playwright Terence (185-159 B.C.) said, "As many opinions as men." The French writer Montaigne (1533-1592) declared, "Nothing is so firmly believed as that we least know." George Santayana (1863-1952), the Spanish-born American philosopher, spoke of "the brute necessity of believing something so long as life lasts." And then there were popular sayings

like: "Believe that you have it, and you have it" and "I believe because it is impossible."

These sayings all have at their root the sense that faith is essentially grounded in man and is a subjective quality. But in the Bible faith is grounded in God and is something that springs from his encounter with the individual.

Again, the fact that biblical faith is faith in God's promise is not "unimportant," because it is along these identical lines that we must believe God today if we, like Abraham, are to be saved. We are not saved because we have a strong subjective faith (that would focus the matter on us), but because we believe the promises of God regarding salvation, promises made known to us in the pages of the Bible. In other words, Christian faith is a Bible faith. Or, to put it in still other words, we are saved not because of our faith but because of God's promises. True faith is receiving these promises and believing them on the basis of God's character.

The Word of God Only

The second characteristic of Abraham's faith is that it was based on what D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has called "the bare Word of God and on nothing else whatsoever." We go back to Genesis 15 and find that God promised Abraham many offspring (as numerous as the stars in the heavens) at a time when he had no children at all. To be sure, the situation seemed not quite as hopeless as it was later to become. Abraham was then about eighty-five years old, but he was still able to engender a child, as he proved by fathering a child by Sarah's handmaid Hagar. Fourteen years later, at the time of the conception of Isaac, Abraham was not even physically able to father a child. Still, by the time of his life described in Genesis 15, Abraham had lived most of a century without having any children. It seemed that he and Sarah would die childless. Yet here was God promising not only that they would have an heir but that they would eventually have descendants beyond any human possibility of counting.

Where could Abraham find external support to assist him in believing this "wild" promise? There was no such support! From the point of view of human experience, the situation was not promising. He had no prior examples of fecundity in old age that he could rest his belief on. So, if Abraham believed God, as he did, it was only because it was God who had made the promise.

It is the same when we trust God in the matter of salvation today. God says that he has given his
Son in death for us so that "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). What else in life can sustain you in believing such a promise except the bare words of God in the Bible. Apart from God's Word, we do not even know anything about eternal life, let alone how to obtain it. The invisible world is hidden from us. No human being can tell us anything. So, if we find salvation, it is by believing God's Word, pure and simple.

Is that too hard to do? In some ways, it is. But why should we not believe God? Human beings can deceive us and often do. But God's word is his bond, and he never changes his mind.
Therefore, although we do not have *external* support for believing him, we do not need it. In fact, it would be an insult to the character of God to maintain that we believe God only because of the word or experience of some human being. How can anything human ever support the Eternal? It is rather the other way around.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "There is always this naked element in faith. It does not ask for proofs, it does not seek them; in a sense it does not need them. Faith is content with the bare Word of God, because he is God."

Despite All Contrary Appearances

The vitality of Abraham's faith (and therefore of all true faith) was greater even than this. For, as Paul points out in the closing verses of Romans 4, it was not a case of Abraham's merely believing God in the

absence of all external supports; he believed God when the external evidences were actually and sharply to the contrary.

This is the meaning of the sentence "against all hope, Abraham in hope believed" (v. 18). It means that from a human perspective the situation was hopeless. But since God had spoken, Abraham was willing to believe God despite the adverse physical evidence. At this point it is clear that Paul's thought is moving beyond the situation described in Genesis 15 to the utterly "impossible" conditions of Genesis 17. As we have seen, by this time Abraham was ninety-nine years old and there was no longer any hope that the aged couple could have their own child. When they were a bit younger, perhaps. But not at this point, not now. That is why the text says, "Without weakening in his faith, he [Abraham] faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead" (v. 19).

There is an interesting textual variation in this verse which is worth mentioning briefly. In many of the ancient manuscripts there is a negative in the early part of this sentence that would call for the translation "he did *not* consider." If this reading is followed, the sense would be: "Abraham was so strong in faith that he did not consider that his body was as good as dead." Usually, a negative would give an entirely contrary meaning. But in this case, strangely, either of the readings make sense and mean about the same thing. If the negative is omitted, as the New International Version seems to consider correct, the sentence means: "Abraham faced the fact that his body was as good as dead and believed God anyway." If the negative is retained, the course followed by the King James Version, the sentence would be what I suggested earlier. In either case, it means that Abraham was aware of the utter hopelessness of the situation. Yet he believed God in spite of all circumstances.

Moreover, this is what Genesis itself indicates. Although it is not thrown up to Abraham later in the Bible—God seems always to remember the victories and not the failures of his children— Genesis 17:17 tells us that, when the original promise was repeated to Abraham

when he was even older, initially he laughed since he knew how preposterous this was: "Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'"

Yet, when the chips were down, Abraham believed God rather than the limitations of his own physical capabilities. And in the following year the promised child was born to Abraham and Sarah.

I do not often cite the testimony of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth in my studies. But Barth had an enviable sense of the greatness of God and, by contrast, the utter weakness and hopelessness of all things human. At this point in his highly esteemed Romans commentary, he quotes with evident approval some strong words about faith by Martin Luther:

"What could be more irrational and laughable, ridiculous and impossible, than God's words to Abraham?... Moreover, all the articles of our Christian belief are, when considered rationally, just as impossible and mendacious and preposterous. Faith, however, is completely abreast of the situation. It grips reason by the throat and strangles the beast. It effects what the whole world and all that is in it is impotent to do. But how can faith do this? By holding on to God's word and by accounting it right and true, however stupid and impossible it may appear. By this means did Abraham imprison his reason.... And in the same fashion do all other believers who have entered the dark recesses of faith throttle reason, saying: Listen, Reason, thou blind and stupid fool that understandest not of the things of God. Cease thy tricks and chattering; hold thy tongue and be still! Venture no more to criticize the Word of God. Sit thee down; listen to his words; and believe in him. So do the faithful... achieve what the whole world is incompetent to achieve. And thereby they do our Lord God supreme and notable service."

No one should understand this as meaning that faith is "irrational," since nothing is more rational than to believe God even in the face of evidence to the contrary. But it does mean that faith stands always with

God and his Word, even when doing so appears foolish from a human perspective.

Full Assurance of Faith

The fourth characteristic of Abraham's faith is assurance. Paul says this in a number of ways: (1) "without weakening in his faith" (v. 19); (2) "he did not waver through unbelief (v. 20); and (3) he "was strengthened in his faith" (v. 20). But the chief statement is in verse 21: "being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." Some of the other versions of this verse are worth noting. The Revised Standard Version says that Abraham was "fully convinced."
The New English Bible speaks of a "firm conviction." Phillips says that Abraham was "absolutely convinced." The New American Standard Bible speaks of him as "being fully assured."

This is an important point. True faith should always have this assurance.

But how does faith achieve this in a world where flesh is weak and circumstances are usually more powerful than we are? There is only one answer: True faith has assurance because it is directed neither to ourselves nor to circumstances but to God. We are weak, so faith grounded in ourselves is always weak and will weaken further, waver, and slip away, just as Peter's faith wavered when he looked away from Jesus and instead glanced at the churning waves of Galilee over which he was attempting to walk from the disciples' small boat to the Master (Matt. 14:2831). Faith that is grounded in the being and character of God will go from strength to more strength, since God is faithful.

Faith That Acts

There is one more characteristic of Abraham's faith that we dare not omit and need to remind ourselves of before going on. It is that faith acts. Faith believes God, but it also acts decisively. In fact, I define true biblical faith as "believing God and acting upon it."

Did Abraham believe God? Of course he did. He believed God enough to engender the child of the promise when he was ninety-nine years old. But I have often thought that even greater than that would have been his act of announcing his change of name to those who lived with him—even before Isaac's conception. You know, I am sure, that in its original form Abraham's name was Abram and that Abram meant "father of many" (literally, "father of a people"). That was appropriate in view of God's promise that he and Sarah (originally Sarai) would have many children. But they had had no children for many decades, and the name became an increasing embarrassment for him as the years slipped by.

It must have been a matter of embarrassment for Sarai/Sarah, too. For she was a proud woman and wanted to settle once and for all whether the problem lay in her inability to bear children or in her husband's infertility. What else would cause a woman to send her husband into another woman's arms? But she gave her handmaid Hagar to Abram to see if he could father a child by her, and although Abram should have refused, trusting God to provide the promised heir in his own time, he listened to his wife and so had Ishmael by Hagar. How proud the patriarch was of Ishmael, fathered after years of infertility. Later, when God came to renew the promise of the heir again, Abraham pleaded with God to accept Ishmael (then thirteen years old) instead, saying, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" (Gen. 17:18).

Still there was only one child for a man whose name meant "father of many." The jokes at the patriarch's expense must have been very painful to him.

But when God appeared to Abraham before his hundredth birthday to say that the promise had not been forgotten and that the couple would have a child by the same time next year, God also announced the change in Abram's name. He, in turn, would have announced this to the hundreds of people who were part of his entourage.

What interest there would have been when Abram indicated that he was going to change his name!

"He is going to change his name?"

"I wonder what to."

"He has been Abram, father of many, for so many years. That must have been a difficult thing to live with. Perhaps he is going to change it to Abechad, 'father of one,' since that is all he is, after all."

Then Abraham made his announcement: "God appeared to me last night and told me that I am to change my name from Abram, 'father of many,' to Abraham (which, translated colloquially, means), 'father of a vast, vast multitude' (literally, "father of a nation")."

I suppose the laughter broke out behind the scenes at that point and was only barely suppressed by those who were closest to Abraham. For what could be more ridiculous than such a change of name? Preposterous! Foolish! But it was not foolish, particularly not to Abraham, since he was looking at things from the perspective of God's promise and was willing to act publicly on his convictions regarding God's power, truth, and faithfulness. The next year the son of the promise was born to him.

How about you? Will you act on your faith as Abraham acted? Will you step out in faith, believing the promise of God concerning the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ? You will get little support from the world to help you make such a commitment. On the contrary, the world will hinder you as much as it possibly can and think you are irrational, even foolish. But where is the foolishness found? Is it on the side of those who trust God? Or is it on the side of unbelievers, who trust only themselves and the world, both of which are passing away? I urge you to trust God and act on it.

Chapter 58.
The Ground of Abraham's Faith

Romans 4:18-22

There are times in Bible study when it is necessary to examine every word of a text thoroughly. This is not only a good method; it is also almost always a good place to start. But there are other times when it is helpful to step back from intricate digging and look for the flow of words in a passage and the place of that passage in the chapter or even in the entire book. I want to take the latter approach now in our second and final study of Romans 4:18-22.

What is the flow of these verses?

There is an obvious flow from the thought of Abraham not "weakening in his faith" (v. 19) to being "strengthened in his faith" (v. 20). When we step back from the actual words, that is the first larger picture we see. We can step back even further, and then we see a flow from the idea of hopelessness, with which the section begins ("against all hope," v. 18), to Abraham's being "fully persuaded" of God's promise (v. 21). Nor is this all. If we step back the fullest distance, the embracing flow is from Abraham himself, whose body was "as good as dead" (v. 19) to God, who has "power to do what he had promised" (v. 21). That is another way of expressing what we saw in the preceding study, namely, that Abraham's faith was strong because it was focused on God only.

Read those verses again, this time placing an emphasis on that last idea: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and *gave glory to God*, being fully persuaded that *God had power to do what he had promised*."

Putting this passage in the context of the opening chapters of Romans, we find an interesting contrast. We discover from Romans 1 that the human race rejected God and would not give glory to God (v. 21). But in Romans 4 we find Abraham believing God and making it his utmost concern to glorify him (v. 20).

To God Be the Glory

The overall importance of these points is that they reveal the secret of Abraham's great faith, as we saw in the preceding study. There we looked at the nature of Abraham's faith and saw that it was:

1. Faith in God's promise,
2. Faith based upon the bare words of God and on nothing else whatsoever,
3. Faith despite many strong circumstances to the contrary, 4. Faith that was fully assured, or confident, and
5. Faith that acted in response to God's word.

But as soon as we ask, "How could Abraham's faith achieve such strength and such
characteristics when it had no external support and the world was against it?" we see that it was because *Abraham's faith was directed to God*, who alone is the source of all true strength and confidence.

If Abraham's faith had been grounded in himself (or other human beings) or had depended for its nurture upon his own firmness of will or depth of feelings, his faith would have weakened, wavered, and then died. Instead, his faith was strengthened—because it was in Almighty God alone.

This is what the Bible teaches *our* faith is also to be grounded in. I think of Hebrews 12:1-2, for example. These verses, which come immediately after the chapter that lists the great heroes of faith from the Old Testament, teach that we are to look *to God* in faith, as they did. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of our faith..." (italics mine).

In the preceding chapter of Hebrews we are told that Abraham "was looking forward to the city with foundations" (Heb. 11:10a). But it is even more important to see that Abraham looked to the God who planned and built that city. Abraham looked *forward* to the city, much as we anticipate rewards for faithful service. But, most of all, Abraham looked *to* God and glorified him.

To say that Abraham grounded his faith in God is to say that he fixed his mind on God. This means that he disciplined himself to think about who God is and what he is like. In other words, he contemplated God's attributes. And what is that but giving glory to God? To glorify God is to rehearse his attributes mentally and to praise him for them. What attributes of God did Abraham fill his mind with? The answer, no doubt, is all of them—or at least all the attributes of God he was aware of.

In this study, I want to focus on the attributes of God suggested in our passage.

The God Who Cannot Lie

The first attribute of God that Abraham fixed his mind on was God's truthfulness, the fact that God does not lie. Later, Paul will write this to his friend and co-worker Titus, saying explicitly that our faith is in "God, who does not lie" (Titus 1:2). The truthfulness of God is an underlying assumption in these verses from Romans, and certainly in the life of Abraham as a whole. The truthfulness of God was basic to Abraham's faith in God's promise. If God were not truthful, the promise would have meant nothing to Abraham and would mean nothing to anyone else. It would be only empty words. But because God is truthful, the promise is true and can be trusted implicitly.

Abraham was willing to act on his conviction that God is always truthful. When God told Abraham (Abram) to leave his own land and go to a land that he would show him, Abraham believed God and "set out from Haran" (Gen. 12:4).

When God promised him that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven, saying "so shall your offspring be," Abraham "believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:5-6; cf. Rom. 4:3).

When God renewed the promise of a son in Abraham's old age, Abraham believed God again and accepted his name change, as well as the rite of circumcision, to show that he believed him (Gen. 17).

Confidence in the truthfulness of God contributed to Abraham's victory in the greatest test of his life: the demand by God that he sacrifice his son on Mount Moriah. Abraham reasoned that since God had promised a numerous posterity through Isaac and since Isaac had not yet married or had children, to keep his word God would have to raise Isaac from the dead (Gen. 22:1-18, esp. v. 5; cf. Heb. 11:17-19). Abraham proceeded on the basis of this faith and was about to perform the sacrifice when God stopped him.

Such complete confidence is vital to any individual's proper relationship to God, since we cannot know, come to, or please God unless we have faith in or believe him (cf. Heb. 11:6).

This is why the Bible, in which God makes his promises to us, has been under such severe attacks by unbelievers in our time. I have participated in many church conferences or consultations in which an ordained minister will say something like this: "I know that the Bible says that, but those words are the product of the limited and erring outlooks of people who lived in that time. We don't have to be bound by them today."

Sometimes they have been more specific: "Paul was wrong when he said that."

Others even say, "Jesus was mistaken," as was implied in a particularly devastating statement made by Dr. Robert G. Bratcher, a translator of the *Good News for Modern Man* Bible. At a three-day national seminar of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, he said: "Quoting what the Bible says in the context of history and culture is not

necessarily relevant and helpful— and may be a hindrance in trying to meet and solve the problems we face.... Even words spoken by Jesus in Aramaic in the thirties of the first century and preserved in writing in Greek thirtyfive to fifty years later do not necessarily wield compelling or authentic authority over us today." That is a powerful expression of unbelief! For Bratcher is not merely saying that the words attributed to Jesus are wrong, being incorrectly reported, but that the very words of Jesus [in Aramaic] may be wrong. And that means that Jesus either was mistaken or lied.

Would Abraham have spoken those words? He would never have done so. He was as far from saying that as the faith of angels is from dogged unbelief.

We are sometimes told that we can believe God without believing the Bible. But it does not require a course in logic to see the absurdity of that statement. If the Bible is not God's Word, to be fully believed because it is God's Word, then where does God tell us anything? Where does God ever show us what needs to be believed? And if there is nowhere that God does speak, to say that we can believe him is ridiculous. If God has not spoken to us truthfully in the Bible, then we cannot exercise belief in him—even if we want to.

Look at the possibilities:

1. Either God has spoken to us in the Bible, which is truthful because God is truthful and which we therefore need to believe implicitly, *or*
2. God has not spoken clearly anywhere, and therefore to say that he is truthful and that we believe him is meaningless.

The only possible way to avoid this—a way unfortunately taken by some so-called evangelical scholars of our day—is that God has spoken in the Bible but that the divine and therefore true parts of the Bible are mixed with human error. If that is the case, who is to winnow the divine wheat from the human chaff? The only possible answers are either (1) the individual himself by some subjective process, or (2) the scholar.

But in either case, "faith" is not directed to God but to human beings, either ourselves or the scholars, who decide what God has said and what can be trusted. This is not believing God. It is believing in ourselves.

Those who affirm the truthfulness of God always affirm the truthfulness of the biblical revelation.

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

The second attribute of God by which Abraham steadied his faith was God's faithfulness.
Nothing in our text says this explicitly, but it is implied by Abraham's steadfast adherence to God's promise. Abraham staked his life on God's promise, and this was based on his conviction not only that God does not lie but also that he does not change his mind.

We know very little of true faithfulness on the part of human beings. In fact, it is far more common to hear of *un*faithfulness today than of faithfulness. People try to wriggle out of contracts. Spouses abandon one another. Individuals promise to do something but then "forget" to do it. God is not like this. Moses said to the Israelites, "God... is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments" (Deut. 7:9). Paul wrote to Timothy: "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself (2 Tim. 2:13). Arthur W. Pink has written: "Everything about God is great, vast, incomparable. He never forgets, never fails, never falters, never forfeits his word. To every declaration of promise or prophecy the Lord has exactly adhered, every engagement or covenant or threatening he will make good, for 'God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?' (Num. 23:19)."

Abraham grounded his faith in God's faithfulness. And so should we, above all whenever we find ourselves to be weak, fearful, or anxious. A. W. Tozer wrote wisely, "The tempted, the anxious, the fearful, the

discouraged may all find new hope and good cheer in the knowledge that our Heavenly Father is faithful.... The hard-pressed sons of the covenant may be sure that he will never remove his loving-kindness from them nor suffer his faithfulness to fail."

The God Who Is Able

I have been saying that some of the attributes of God to which Abraham directed his mind are not explicit but rather are implied in our passage. But that is not the case with the attribute to which we now come. This attribute is power: "all power," or omnipotence, as we should say. It is stated in several places. In Romans 4:18-22 it occurs in verse 21, which says that Abraham "was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." In the paragraph before this it is expressed as faith in God "who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (v. 17).

That last phrase—"calls things that are not as though they were"—is particularly interesting because it indicates the frame of thought in which Abraham was moving. What is it speaking of? It is hard to miss that it is a reference to God's power in creation, for it was there above all that God called into being things that were not.

In my studies of creation I have pointed out that there are only four possible explanations of the origin of the universe: (1) that the universe had no origin but rather is eternal; (2) that everything came from a personal something that is good; (3) that everything came from a personal something that is bad; and (4) that there has always been a dualism. These possibilities can be narrowed down to numbers 1 and 2, however, since numbers 3 and 4 do not stand up to careful analysis. This means that the real choice is between an eternity of matter and the Christian view of creation. But the interesting thing is that today non-Christians tend toward another utterly irrational view: that somehow the universe evolved (or brought itself) into being.

It is easy to see how this idea has come about. There has been a rejection of the Christian view of origins on moral grounds, though they

are called "scientific." We do not like God, so we dismiss him out of hand. But the idea of an eternity of matter has been destroyed by science itself through what has been called the Big Bang theory.

The evidence points to an origin to the universe. But what exactly was that origin? How did the universe come about? If it was not created by God, the only seeming possibility left is that it created itself, which is what unbelievers are coming increasingly to hold. But that is irrational, as I said. For something to create itself, what would be necessary? Obviously, it would have to exist to do the creating, which means that it would have to exist and yet not exist at the same time. Nothing is more manifestly absurd. But that is the way the understanding of our culture has been heading.

Fortunately, Abraham knew better than this and was aware, as believers today are also aware, that God brought all things into being out of nothing—and that because he was able to do that, he was able to keep his promises to Abraham.

"But, Abraham, for God to give you a child in your old age will require a miracle," says a skeptic in the patriarch's time.

"True," Abraham replies, "but not a greater miracle than God's bringing everything in this cosmos into being out of nothing, simply by his own power and the words of his mouth." Abraham reckoned that what God promised he was able also to perform.

All Christians know this. And that is why believers have been able to believe God in spite of adverse circumstances. Noah believed that God would destroy *the* earth by a flood. He built the equivalent of an 18,000-ton ship to prepare for it. Gideon believed that God would drive out Israel's enemies, even though he was greatly outnumbered. Obeying God, he routed them with just three hundred soldiers. And what about the Virgin Mary? She believed God's promise that she would give birth to the Messiah, the Savior of the world, even though she had never known a man. Miraculous? Yes. Impossible? Not for the God who has already created all things out of nothing.

Why should it be so impossible for you to trust God? It is highly unlikely that your circumstances even require a miracle. All you need to do is believe God and act upon that faith.

How to Grow Your Faith

A number of years ago the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology held a spring conference on the theme: "How To Grow Your Faith." It was on what theologians call "the means of grace," and it dealt with such subjects as prayer, worship, Bible study, fellowship, and the sacraments. In the course of the weekend it became increasingly evident that the most important, indeed, the *foundational* means of growing faith is Bible study.

Why is that? Because of the very matter we are studying. True biblical faith is not something you and I are capable of working up ourselves, as if we could merely decide to be men and women of faith in the same way we might decide to take up aerobics or pursue degrees in higher education. Faith is only as strong as its object, and it is therefore created in us by God and built up by God through our coming to know him. But how do we do that? The only way we can come to know God is by coming to know his self-revelation in Scripture—and then applying what we learn to our own circumstances.

Here is the way D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it toward the end of his commentary on Romans 3 and 4:

If you are anxious to know how to have a strong faith, here is the method. It means thorough and deep knowledge of the Bible and of God through it; not suddenly taking up an idea and deciding
to "go in" for faith. If you want to have strong faith, read your Bible; go through it from beginning to end. Concentrate on the revelation that God has given of himself and of his character. Keep your eye especially also on prophecy, and then watch his promises being fulfilled. That is the way to develop strong faith—be grounded in all this. Then read the historical portions of the Bible, and the stories of the great heroes. That is why the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives that gallery of portraits of these great saints in the eleventh chapter. He says, Look at

these men, who were men like yourselves. What was their secret? It was that they knew God, they gave glory to God and relied utterly upon him and his word. Turn that over in your mind, keep on speaking to yourself about it; meditate upon it.... Then, finally, you apply all that in practice to particular cases as they arise in your own life and experience. "He staggered not, but gave glory to God." That is the secret of faith. It is our ignorance of God that constitutes our main trouble.

Ours is not an age of great faith—even in evangelical churches. We are weak in faith, and the reason we are weak in faith is that we do not know the Bible's God. Or if we do, we do not put what we do know into practice.

Chapter 59.
The Christian Faith

Romans 4:23-25

In several preceding studies we have been working through the apostle Paul's proof from the Old Testament of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Paul has given two Old Testament examples, Abraham and King David, but his chief example has been Abraham. Indeed, the fourth chapter of Romans has been almost entirely about him.

But Paul was no mere antiquarian, one who was in love with the past for its own sake. Paul was writing for the present. So, as he comes to the end not only of Romans 4 but of the first major section of the letter, he returns to his first theme, reminding his readers that the things that were written in the Old Testament were written for us and that proof of the doctrine of justification by faith from the case of Abraham is for our present benefit. He concludes, "The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, *but also for us,* to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (vv. 23-25, italics mine).

This passage is a summation of the Christian gospel, and a study of it is an appropriate way to end this first expository volume on the Book of Romans.

The Apostolic Gospel

A number of years ago, a professor from Cambridge University in England named C. H. Dodd wrote a book called *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments.* It was a little book—56 pages in all—but it was influential in the field of biblical studies, since it showed in a convincing way that the apostolic preachers all followed a broadly accepted outline of key facts concerning the life and ministry of Jesus Christ when they presented the gospel to unbelievers. Dodd called this list of key facts the *kerygma*, a Greek word that means "proclamation," in order to distinguish it from the ethical and other teachings of Jesus, which were not part of the message proclaimed to unbelievers but which were reserved for the further instruction of converts. Dodd called this additional body of material the *didachē* or "teachings."

One classical statement of the *kerygma* occurs in 1 Corinthians 15:1-7, where it is introduced as something Paul had received from those who were in the faith before him. In that passage it seems to have three parts:

1. "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (v. 3),
2. "that he was buried" (v. 4), and
3. "that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (v. 4).

That brief rehearsal is then followed by a list of those who were witnesses to the resurrection (vv. 57).

In the sermons recorded in Acts we see this same pattern, but the list is elaborated to include such items as: the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, Old Testament prophecies of Christ's coming, evidence of Jesus' divine power by his miraculous works, Jesus' ascension into

heaven, and the future role of Jesus in the final judgment. Sometimes the *kerygma* is complete. Sometimes it is abbreviated. In each instance what lies at its heart is a proclamation of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord.

These items are important here, because in Romans 4:23-25 we have the basic gospel in its most compact form. Martin Luther wrote, "In these verses the whole of Christianity is comprehended."

Faith in God

The first point in Paul's summary of the gospel in Romans 4 is not strictly part of the *kerygma*, as Dodd defines it. But it is presupposed by the *kerygma* and is what links the content of this explicitly Christian statement of faith to the case of Abraham. It is belief in God. Paul expresses this by saying, "The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

This sentence involves both continuity with and development beyond Abraham's example. The continuity is important, since the God whom Christians believe in is the same as the God Abraham believed in, and the nature of the faith involved in trusting that God is therefore also the same. This is why we have been able to make practical applications from Abraham's life to our own lives. In discussing Abraham's faith, I pointed out that it was:

1. Faith in God's promise,
2. Faith based on the bare words of God and on nothing else whatever,
3. Faith despite many strong circumstances to the contrary,
4. Faith that was fully assured, and
5. Faith that acts.

That is exactly what our faith is to be and do, and the reason is that it is faith in the God in whom Abraham believed. Moreover, such faith is to

grow increasingly strong, because it is grounded not upon itself but upon God. In these ways, Abraham's faith is the same as our own.

But our faith also involves development beyond Abraham's faith, because, as Paul writes, it is faith "in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." True, there are items of continuity even here. Abraham's faith in the promise was an anticipatory faith in Jesus since the promise ultimately was fulfilled in him. Again, the fact that Abraham believed in "God who gives life to the dead" finds a parallel in our belief in Jesus' resurrection. Still, there are also differences due to progressive revelation. Because we live on this side of the incarnation and atonement, we understand that the God in whom we believe is identical with Jesus. He said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Moreover, we recognize that the chief revelation of God is at the cross and in the resurrection.

In other words, Abraham had a promise, but we have a gospel, the Good News. Abraham looked forward to what God had said he would do. We look back to what God has already accomplished.

Delivered to Death for Our Sins

What has God accomplished? This brings us back to the *kerygma* and to the first of its great declarations in our text, namely, that Jesus "was delivered over to death for our sins." According to the Book of Acts, Peter made the identical declaration at Pentecost in these words: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). Later in the same book, when Paul is at Pisidian Antioch, he declares: "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed" (Acts 13:27-28).

There are two important points to these classic proclamations of Christ's death.

1. *It was planned by God.* The Revised Standard Version renders part of Romans 4:25 as "Jesus... was put to death," but this translation greatly weakens what the apostle is saying. It is not just that Jesus was put to death, that is, "executed," true as that is. It is that Jesus was delivered over to death by God. Sometimes people get into debates over who was responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. Was it the Jews, who hated him and asked Pilate to have him killed? Or was it the Romans, who actually carried out the execution? The passages I have quoted recognize the guilt of both parties, plus that of the masses of Jerusalem. But that is not what they are chiefly concerned about. Their emphasis is upon this being the work of God, who by it was

accomplishing salvation for all who would believe on Christ. This is why, in another place, Jesus is referred to as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

It was God the Father who sent the Lord Jesus Christ to the cross. This tells us that the death of Jesus was no accident, but rather the accomplishment of God's plan of redemption, devised even before the universe was created. It is why Jesus came.

2. *It was for others.* The death of Jesus, thus planned by God, was for others, which means that it was substitutionary or vicarious. Paul says that it was "for our sins." Death is God's punishment for sin, its consequence. But Jesus had not sinned and therefore did not deserve death. That he did die was because he was dying in our place as our sin-bearer.

In his great commentary on Bible doctrine, which uses Romans as a "point of departure," Donald Grey Barnhouse illustrates the substitutionary nature of Christ's death by the story of Barabbas. We know that Barabbas was a robber and murderer who had been arrested by the Romans and was in prison awaiting execution at the time of the trial of Jesus Christ. Pilate had no concern for Barabbas—the world would be better off without him—but he wanted to save Jesus and so hit on the idea of offering the people a choice between the two. It was customary to free a prisoner at the time of the Feast of Passover.

"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" Pilate asked the crowd (Matt. 27:21).

He was astonished when the people replied, "Barabbas!"

Barnhouse pictures Barabbas sitting in the prison, staring at his hands, which were soon to be pierced by nails, and shuddering at any sound of hammering that might remind him with horror of his own impending crucifixion. Suddenly he hears a crowd roaring outside the prison. There are angry voices. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" He thinks he hears his own name. Then a jailer comes to unlock the door of his cell. Barabbas thinks that the time for his execution has come, but instead the jailer tells him that he is being set free. The crowd has called for his release. Jesus of Nazareth is to die instead.

Stunned, Barabbas joins the processional that is making its way to Calvary and watches as Jesus is crucified. He hears the sound of the hammer and knows that the blows that are fastening Jesus to the rough wooden cross were meant for him. He sees the cross lifted high into place and knows that he is the one who should be dying on it.

Jesus cries, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The centurion who has commanded the execution party exclaims, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

Barabbas must have been saying, "That man took my place. I am the one who should have died. I am the condemned murderer. That man did nothing wrong. He is dying for me."

Barnhouse concludes, "Barabbas was the only man in the world who could say that Jesus Christ took his physical place. But [all who are Christians] can say that Jesus Christ took [their] spiritual place." The fact that we are sinners means that we deserve to die. We deserve the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. But Jesus was delivered up for our offenses. He was crucified for our sins. That is why we speak of substitutionary atonement and vicarious suffering, and it is why Jesus'

death is so central to the gospel. Nothing that overlooks the death of Christ is the gospel. As Barnhouse says, "Christianity can be expressed in three phrases: I deserved Hell; Jesus took my Hell; there is nothing left for me but his heaven."

Raised for Our Justification

The final part of the gospel in our passage is the resurrection. Paul speaks of it twice: (1) [It was written] "for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (v. 24), and (2) "He... was raised to life for our justification" (v. 25).

Why does he say that Jesus was raised "for our justification"? At first glance this seems to be a problem because, according to Paul's own teaching elsewhere, it is the death of Christ (not the resurrection) that is the basis for God's justification of sinners (Rom. 5:9). Even Romans 3 has said it: "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (v. 24). Redemption has to do with Jesus' death. There is no mention of the resurrection at all in that passage.

There are a number of explanations of the meaning of the phrase "raised to life for our justification," but the one that has commended itself to most expositors is that the resurrection is God's proof, provided for our benefit, that a full payment for sins has been made.

The resurrection proves a great many things. It proves that:

1. There is a God and that the God of the Bible is the true God,
2. Jesus was a teacher sent from God; he was inerrant in his teaching and spoke the very words of God,
3. Jesus is the Son of God,
4. There is a day of judgment coming,
5. Every believer in Christ is justified from all sin,

6. All who are united to Christ by a living faith will live again, and
7. Christians can have victory over sin.

But chiefly the resurrection proves that every believer in Christ is justified from all sin, as Romans 4:25 declares. In other words, it is God's evidence to us that the penalty for our transgressions has been fully paid by Jesus.

When Jesus was on earth, he said that he would die for the sins of others. The time for the crucifixion came, and he did die. But the question remained: Was his death fully acceptable to God for others' sins? Did God accept his atonement? We know that if Jesus had sinned, however slightly, his death could not atone even for his own sin let alone the sin of others. For three days the question remained unanswered. The body of Jesus lay in the cold Judean tomb. But then the hour came. The breath of God swept through the sepulcher, and Jesus rose to appear to his followers and later to ascend to the right hand of the Father. By this means God declared to the entire universe, "I have accepted the atonement Jesus made."

Reuben A. Torrey writes, "When Jesus died, he died as my representative, and I died in him; when he arose, he rose as my representative, and I arose in him.... I look at the cross of Christ, and I know that atonement has been made for my sins; I look at the open sepulcher and the risen and ascended Lord, and I know that the atonement has been accepted. There no longer remains a single sin on me, no matter how many or how great my sins may have been. My sins may have been as high as the mountains, but in the light of the resurrection the atonement that covers them is as high as heaven. My sins may have been as deep as the ocean, but in the light of the resurrection the atonement that swallows them up is as deep as eternity." D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The resurrection is the proclamation of the fact that God is fully and completely satisfied with the work that his Son did upon the Cross."

Point of Decision

We have come to the end of the fourth chapter of Romans and therefore to the end of the first major section of Paul's letter. It has been a long journey.

Paul begins with an analysis of man's lost condition. Far from everything being well with the human race, as the optimists of his day and ours wrongly suppose, the race is actually under the wrath of God for its failure to receive the revelation of himself that God has made in nature, and its refusal to thank God for creation and to seek him out more fully in order to worship him. Instead of following the truth, people have suppressed the truth, and in its place they have created imaginary gods like themselves and even like animals. Having turned from God, who is the source of all good, they have entered on a downhill path marked by sexual and other perversions until they come at last to the point where they are willing to call good evil, and evil good.

No one naturally agrees to this assessment, of course. It is part of what rejecting truth is all about. So Paul next spends time dealing with the arguments of those who would exempt themselves from those conclusions.

One objector is the ethically moral man, who considers Paul's judgments true of others but not of himself. Paul tells him that he stands condemned before God, not only because he has broken God's perfect standard of righteousness, but also because he has not even lived up to his own personal standard, however high or low it may be.

Another objector is the religious person, who thinks that he is exempted because of his religious observances. Paul does not discount the value of religious actions, but he denies that they can change the heart, which is the thing that matters. The end of his argument is that all stand condemned before God: "'There is no one righteous, not even one.... no one who understands, no one who seeks God'" (Rom. 3:10-11).

Finally, Paul unfolds the gospel, showing that God has acted to save sinners through the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot save ourselves. We do not deserve saving. But God is gracious, and because he is, he sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die in our place. By his death, Jesus turned the wrath of God aside and became the grounds upon which God has been able to justify the ungodly. At the end of Romans 4, Paul has returned to this theme after having shown that this is the same method by which the Old Testament saints, such as Abraham and David, were justified.

But what was written in the Old Testament was not written for these believers alone, Paul says. It was written "also for us," that is, for people living today, so that we might be saved as Abraham was.

Abraham was saved by faith. So the question is: Do you believe in God and trust his promises, as the patriarch did? Although he knew less about the person and work of Jesus than you do, his faith was not different in kind from yours, and for that very reason he remains your example. Remember what we said about his faith? Abraham (1) believed God's promise; (2) believed on the basis of the Word of God only; (3) believed in spite of adverse circumstances; (4) was fully assured that God would do whatever he had promised; and (5) acted on that confidence.

That is what you must do, too. God has promised salvation through the work of Jesus Christ. You must trust his word in this, even though the circumstances of life may seem to rule against it. Abraham looked at himself and considered his body as good as dead. You also are dead to spiritual things. But you must believe what God says, commit yourself to Christ, as he tells you to do, and find that the power of God that was active in quickening Abraham's old body will quicken you.

Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God" (Rom. 4:20). Neither should your faith falter. Receive the promise, and believe in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Romans, Volume 2

The Reign of Grace (Romans 5-8)

*To **HIM** who caused grace to reign through righteousness to bring us eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*

Preface

More than a year and a half has gone by since I wrote the preface to volume one of these expository studies of Paul's great letter to the Romans. Yet I did not expect to be writing the preface to volume two so soon. The reason for my change of plans is the very welcome decision by Baker Book House to publish simultaneously the first two volumes of what I project to be a four-volume set on the Book of Romans. By this means those who are interested in my attempts to sound the depths of Paul's teaching will be able to use both volumes to work through at least the first important half of Romans without undue delay.

The remaining two volumes, on chapters 9 through 11 and chapters 12 through 16, will follow as quickly as I am able to preach through them in the course of my regular ministry at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, which I have served now for nearly a quarter of a century.

In my introduction to volume one I mention how little I feel American evangelicals understand this great letter, the greatest of all biblical books, in the opinion of many. I say that very few understand chapters 1 through 4 deeply, though many suppose they do. But if that is the case with those earlier, easier, and fairly familiar chapters, how much more must it be true of chapters 5 through 8! Let me tell you what I think many evangelicals do. I think they read Romans 5:1-11, which they construe as listing only the fruit or benefits of the believer's justification through Jesus Christ, and then skip on to chapter 8 to assure themselves and others that, having been justified by God, they are now eternally

secure in Christ and that nothing will ever separate them from the love of God in him.

That is correct, of course—if one is truly justified or genuinely born again. But the conviction that a person is secure in Christ—"once saved, always saved"—is mere presumption if there is not an inevitable, corresponding, and necessary growth in righteousness and victory over sin following conversion.

That is what these chapters show so convincingly. Their theme is the reign of grace, understood not (as some understand it) as God's being gracious to us regardless of what we may do, even if we continue in a very disobedient and dishonorable walk, but understood rather as grace triumphing in those who are Christ's in order to create a genuinely godly walk and righteousness. Even Romans 8 says this, for it states early on that God "condemned sin in sinful man, *in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us,* who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (vv. 3-4, emphasis added). Those who live according to the sinful nature are not Christians, Paul says in verses 5-8. Rather, Christians are those who are "controlled" by the Spirit (v. 9). Therefore, Christians are those who are having the righteous requirements of the law fulfilled in them.

I believe this is a message that American evangelicals desperately need to hear. For too long we have been subjected to a feeble proclamation of the gospel, which amounts in the end to a denial of it, since it says that it is possible to be regenerate without being sanctified, to be eternally secure in Christ and yet not show any evidence of having the life of Christ within.

No wonder so many so-called evangelicals are indistinguishable from the ungodly, unregenerate people surrounding them, and why the self-proclaimed evangelical churches have been failing to make any appreciable impact on the surrounding culture. We are ineffective because many who consider themselves to be Christians are not saved.

I invite you to walk through these great chapters with me, as my own congregation did from July
1988 through July 1990. (The same studies were also aired over the internationally heard "Bible Study Hour" broadcast after about a six-month delay.)

In these studies of Romans, I have been strengthened in my own awareness of the sovereignty, grace, and holiness of God and of the need for holiness in his people, that is, for holiness in those who profess to be Christians. We are not a holy people, not very. But we can become increasingly holy as we draw near to God and live in the mental universe of these great Bible teachings. Indeed, we must!

As usual, I want to thank the congregation of Tenth Presbyterian Church for allowing me to spend so much time in serious Bible study and in the preparation of these sermons, in particular. I trust the congregation has benefited from them.

May God bless us in these sad days of declining evangelicalism, and may we have a recovery of the whole counsel of God. I know no better way to move in that direction than by studying, meditating on, and once again preaching from the Book of Romans.

Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania

Part Six. Security in Christ

Chapter 60.
Peace with God

Romans 5:1

A number of years ago, *Look* magazine ran a personality feature entitled "Peace of Mind." Sixteen prominent Americans had been asked how they were able to find peace in our stressful world, and the article consisted of their answers.

James Michener, the author of many best-selling books, said that he finds peace by taking his two dogs for a walk "along old streams and into fields that have not been plowed for half a century." Barry Goldwater, the former Senator from Arizona and Republican presidential candidate, said that he finds peace in his hobbies—photography, boating, flying, and camping— but above all by "walking in the Grand Canyon." (It was obvious that Goldwater had been elected to the Senate from "the Grand Canyon state.") Former CBS news anchorman Walter Cronkite finds peace in solitude, usually by "going to the sea by small boat." Margaret Mead, the well-known anthropologist and author of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, sought "a change of pace and scene." Sammy Davis, Jr., said he found peace by looking for "good in people." Bill Moyers, television personality and former press secretary to Lyndon Johnson, tried to find peace in a family "reunion, usually in some remote and quiet retreat."

As I read these answers I was impressed with how subjective and dependent upon favorable circumstances most of the approaches were. But I noted something else, too. Although each of these prominent Americans differed in his or her methods, all were nevertheless seeking peace of mind and recognized that pursuing it was important. No one considered a search for peace to be irrelevant.

What is it that people are most seeking in life, once their basic physical needs are satisfied? Some say they are seeking "freedom." Movements for national liberation are usually based on this intense human desire. But Americans are free. We have been free of foreign domination for over two hundred years, and our constitution and legal system affirm our individual liberties. Yet most of us are as restless and discontented (perhaps even more so) as those living under strongly oppressive regimes. Is it wealth we are seeking? One of the richest men in the world once said, "I thought money could buy happiness. I have been miserably disillusioned." Others seek fulfillment through education, fame, sex, or power, but most are discontented even when they attain such goals. What is the reason? The explanation is that what people are really seeking is peace, and the ultimate and only genuine peace is found in a right relationship with God.

The great North African Christian, Saint Augustine, expressed it best more than a millennium and a half ago, when he wrote in his *Confessions,* "You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."

Peace Through Jesus Christ

If you are restless and seeking peace, the verse that begins the fifth chapter of Paul's magnificent letter to the Romans is addressed to you. For here Paul speaks of peace and tells how it may be found: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I want to put this verse in its context, however. And to do that I need to have you think ahead to what we are going to find in this next major section of Paul's letter (chs. 5-8).

It is traditional among commentators to suggest that at this point in his letter, having explained the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, Paul lists what most writers call "the fruits of justification" and then moves on to discuss sanctification. Peace is one such "fruit," but there are others: access to God through prayer, hope, joy, perseverance,

and a sense of being loved by God. According to this view, Paul interrupts his listing of these fruits of justification at verse 11 to deal with the parallel between Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12-21) and sanctification (Rom. 6:18:17), before returning to the assurance that nothing can separate the believer from God's love, which is another fruit of justification (Rom. 8:18-39). Commentators taking this approach conclude that the chief concern of the apostle in this section of Romans is sanctification.

If the traditional approach is correct, Romans falls into four major sections: (1) a portion dealing with justification (chs. 1-4); (2) a discussion of sanctification (chs. 5-8); (3) the problem of God's dealing with the Jews (chs. 9-11); and (4) practical matters (chs. 12-16).

However, at this point I think that F. Godet and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (who follows him) are right when they suggest that what Paul is actually presenting in Romans 5:1-11 is not "the fruits of justification," though he mentions some of them, but the beginning of a well-developed statement of the security in Christ that comes to a believer as a result of his or her justification.

There are a number of reasons for this interpretation, and there are reasons why it is important, which I will explain later.

I suggested one reason for approaching verses 1-11 in this way when I said that according to the traditional view, Paul *interrupts* his treatment of the "fruits" of justification to deal with the parallel between Adam and Christ and sanctification. Yet interruptions are not what we have been led to expect in this letter. One German commentator sees this to be a real problem, and he does not hesitate to say that at this point "the systematic order of our epistle leaves something to be desired." But is that really so? Any suggestion that Paul is not being systematic should make us pause in our interpretation of his teaching, at least in this letter, which up to now has been a model of consistent and systematic argumentation.

The best arguments against the traditional view are from verses 1-11 themselves. Look at the first sentence. In the New International Version there is a period in the middle of verse 2, separating the sentence "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" from the previous one. But in the Greek text this is actually a continuation and climax. In Greek the passage says what the King James Version allows it to say, namely: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Since "hope of the glory of God" refers to what theologians call glorification, the opening sentence of Romans 5 actually directs our minds to the final glorified state of those who have been justified. And that is exactly where we come out at the end of Romans 8, where Paul argues that nothing is "able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39). This suggests that Paul has chapter 8 in mind as he begins chapter 5 and that he moves consistendy toward his conclusion in the intervening material.

There is another argument as well. In Romans 5:1-2, Paul moves from justification to glorification without mentioning sanctification, the matter that traditionalists suppose to be his main concern. In Romans 8:30, he does the same thing, writing: "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." Justification, then glorification! In both of these texts, one at the beginning of Romans 5-8 and one at the end, the one idea (justification) leads directly to the other (glorification).

It is true that a great deal of sanctification takes place between justification and glorification and that much of what is found in Romans 5-8 bears upon it. But we could well ask why Paul does not mention sanctification either at the start of this section (Rom. 5:1-11) or at the end of it (Rom. 8:18-39), if this is the primary subject he is writing about. Is it not the case that the reason he does not mention sanctification is that he is not *chiefly* concerned about it and that these chapters are actually focused on another matter entirely?

What is that matter? It is the believer's security in Christ or, as we also often say, the "assurance of salvation."

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who sees Romans 5-8 in this light, says that "the apostle is concerned primarily, from this point onwards, to show us the absolute character, the fullness and the finality of the salvation which comes to us in the way he has already described, namely, as the result of justification by faith."

In my opinion, this is the proper and most profitable approach to Romans 5-8.

"Peace with God" and "Peace of God"

When I began my analysis of Romans 5-8, I said that it was *important* to have this approach to these chapters and that I would come back to its importance later. I want to do that now. But to do so I want to make another distinction. It is the distinction between having "peace with God," which is what this section treats, and having the "peace of God," which is another matter.

Most Christians are acquainted with Philippians 4:6-7, which tells us about the peace *of God:* "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Those two verses envision upsetting situations that come into our lives. Perhaps we have lost a job and are worried about earning enough money to provide for our families. Perhaps we are sick, or a friend is sick. Perhaps a person who has been very close to us has died, and suddenly everything seems in turmoil. One writer argues that the death of a close family member or friend is like having an eggbeater thrust into the mixing bowl of our emotional lives. Elisabeth Elliot, who had one husband murdered by Auca Indians in Ecuador and another slowly consumed by cancer, said that this is a time when the earth seems to be giving way, the waters are roaring, and the mountains are being cast into the sea (cf. Ps. 46:2-3). In such times of stress we need personal

peace in our lives, and it is this about which Philippians 4:6-7 is speaking: We can have personal peace by asking God for it.

And it works! I regularly cite these verses when I am writing to people who have lost a close family member, encouraging them to believe that God, who loves them and cares for them, will give them a peace that "transcends all human understanding." Many tell me that this is exactly what God has done for them. He has given them peace in the midst of their emotional turmoil.

But this is not the peace that Romans 5:1 is talking about. Romans 5 is not referring to the "peace *of God*," but to "peace *with* God." The idea here is not that we are upset and therefore need to become trusting and more tranquil, but rather that we have been at war with God and he with us, because of our sin, and that peace has nevertheless been provided for us by God—if we have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

When we see this, we realize that nothing is more appropriate and logical at this point in Romans than such a reference. For what Paul has been saying in the previous section is that God is not at peace with us but is at war with us because of our ungodly and wicked behavior. The word he has been using is "wrath." "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18). Having shown what this means and having answered the objections of those who feel that it is an appropriate description of the condition of *other* people, but not of themselves, Paul then reveals what God has done to satisfy his wrath against men in Jesus Christ. The Son bore the Father's wrath in our place. He died for us, and we receive the benefits of his atonement by believing on him and in what he has done. This is the point at which the fourth chapter of Romans ended.

But where does this lead? Obviously to peace *with* God! Since we have been justified by faith, the cause of the warfare between ourselves and God has been removed, and peace is the result. We therefore *have* peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peace has been provided from God's side, for he has removed the cause of the enmity through Jesus' death.

Peace has been received on our side, for we have "believed God" and have found the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ to be credited to us by God as our righteousness.

One commentator summarizes the point of Romans 5:1 by saying: "Every soul has been at war with God, and therefore every soul must have peace with God through cessation of the hostilities which exist between the individual and the Creator. How is the warfare to be brought to an end?... God has made peace, and no other peace can be made except that which he has already made.... If you come in unconditional surrender, you will find him all peace toward you."

First Peace, Then Blessing

There are some practical applications that we need to make at this point, and they are important enough to be remembered as we make our way through these chapters.

1. *The starting point for all spiritual blessings, in this life and in the life to come, is the peace that God has made with us through the death of Jesus Christ.*

It is no accident that Paul begins Romans 5 with this theme. Many people would like the peace *of God* (or some other kind of peace) in difficult circumstances. They would like to be calm under fire, self-assured in highly pressured situations—to be always under control. Many more would like other blessings. But if God is the ultimate source of all good things, as he clearly is, we can only have them when we have first entered into a right and proper relationship with him. How is that done? The only way is by faith in Christ, as Paul has been arguing. But suppose you will not come that way. In that case, what can you possibly expect but a continuation of the wrath of God—a wrath greatly intensified, in your case, by your rejection of Jesus?

2. *Having been justified by God through faith in Jesus Christ, believers can know that their salvation is secured forever and that now nothing can separate them from God's love.*

This is the point I have been making in this study, and the reason is that it is the chief point of the passage. We have already seen how the first two verses of Romans 5 pass directly from justification to glorification, just as Romans 8:30 also does. These chapters also move inexorably to the great conclusion: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

If this were not enough, we should be led to the same conclusion by the fact that the text itself speaks, not of *seeking* peace with God, but of *having* peace. "*Having* been justified, we *have* peace with God" is what it says.

It is hard to emphasize this too much, since all Christians need to be sure of their salvation. True, there is a false security about which we need to be warned. Mere intellectual assent to doctrine is not saving faith, and boasting of one's security while continuing to sin is presumption. But such qualifications aside, it is important to know that we have been saved by God, that peace has been made between God and ourselves, and that the peace made by God will last forever. Only those who are sure of this salvation can be a help to others.

3. *It is possible to be at peace with God and know that we are at peace with God while, at the same time, fail to experience peace in a given situation.*

It is important to point this out because, if we do not know this in advance and cling to it, we can be thrown into paralyzing doubt whenever tragic circumstances or upsetting situations arise. Death will come into our experience, and we will be agitated. "Bad breaks" will come, and we will be confused by them. Disappointments will shake us.

In such situations we will need to come to God for the help we desperately need. That is why Paul tells the Philippians not to be anxious, "but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" and, as a result, "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7). One great secret of the Christian life is to bring all troubling matters to God in prayer so as to find peace even in the midst of them. But the fact that these situations sometimes cause us to lose our sense of the peace *of* God does not mean that peace *with* God has been destroyed. In fact, knowing that God has made peace with us and that nothing will destroy the peace he has made will enable us to come to him quickly and boldly when we need help.

It will be an evidence of the fact that we have peace with God that we do so. D. Martyn LloydJones says that faith in this matter is like the needle of a compass that always points to the magnetic north. It is possible to deflect it—by a hard blow, for example, or by bringing another magnet close alongside. But these deflections are temporary, and the needle will always return to the proper position. That is what faith is like. It can be jarred or deflected, but it will always return to God—because God has made peace with us. Faith knows this, and God is faith's true home.

4. *These blessings are nevertheless only through the Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul says.*

Paul has been writing about Jesus at the end of Romans 4; he has spoken of his death and resurrection. In this chapter we might have expected him merely to assume the earlier references as a given and say simply, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God," stopping there. But Paul does not do that. Although he has already mentioned Jesus Christ, he now mentions him again, because he does not want us to imagine that we can get anywhere without him. He understands that any feeling of acceptance by God that is not based upon the work of Jesus Christ is an illusion!

At the start of this study I mentioned the feature in *Look* magazine in which sixteen prominent Americans told of the techniques they had developed for finding "peace of mind." There was one person I omitted, and that was Norman Vincent Peale. I did not mention him then because I was holding his reply until now. Peale is known for his philosophy of "positive thinking," which, in the judgment of many people, is not strongly Christian. But Peale nevertheless is a Christian, and in this feature he responded in a truly Christian way. Peale said, "I find peace of mind through a committed relationship with Jesus Christ and through faith in God.... Jesus alone can give you peace. That I've found to be a fact."

So have countless others, and the reason is clear. Jesus gives us peace of mind because he has first made peace between our rebellious souls and God. I commend that peace to you and urge you to put your faith in him.

Chapter 61.
Standing in Grace

Romans 5:1-2

One of the most important principles of sound Bible interpretation is that not everything written in the Bible is for everybody. This seems strange and wrong to some people. But it should not be, because we acknowledge this principle widely in everyday life.

What would you think of a postman who mixed up the addresses on the mail he was entrusted with delivering? Suppose he gave a letter containing a birth announcement to a person who didn't even know the child's parents. Or a bank statement showing an overdrawn account to someone who actually had a large balance. What about death notices? Or invitations to a party? Or bills? It is obvious that unless a letter is delivered to the right person, the postman is not doing his duty. A preacher is something like a postal worker. The Bible is his bag of

messages, and his duty is to see that the right message gets to the right individual.

I emphasize this because we have passed from a section of Romans in which Paul has been explaining the gospel for the benefit of those who have not yet believed it and moved to a section of Romans in which he presents the benefits that belong to those who *have* believed. This means that while the first four chapters have, in a sense, been for everybody—an offer of salvation for the lost and an explanation of the nature of salvation for those who have received it—this present section (chs. 5-8) is only for those who have believed in Jesus Christ.

This is clear from the opening words of Romans 5: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith...." *If* you have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ, the benefits now to be listed are for you, says Paul. If you have not been justified, they are not for you. You must begin by believing in Jesus.

Peace: The Foundation

We have already seen one of these benefits in our study of the very first verse. It is "peace with God." This is a military metaphor, of course, and we have seen that it points to the fact that before our justification by God on the basis of Christ's work, we were not at peace with God. We might be inclined to say, as Henry David Thoreau is quoted as having said, "I am not at war with God." But we are lying if we say that. The Lord Jesus Christ said that man's chief responsibility is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and that the second is to "love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37, 39; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). But we do not do that. We actually hate God, hate others, and hate ourselves. We would do away with God if we could. We murder others when we can. And we commit spiritual suicide every day of our lives.

But, having been justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, this state of spiritual warfare has been changed to one of peace. We have peace with God, make peace with others, and experience a new measure

of personal peace ourselves. This is the first great benefit of our justification.

A Few Important Definitions

In Romans 5:2, we come to a second benefit. But unlike verse 1, which speaks clearly of having peace with God, this verse is a bit hard to understand. There is a textual variation, for one thing, though it is not of great importance. Some Bible versions—the New International Version is among them—have the words "by faith" in verse 2, so the text reads: "we have gained access *by faith* into this grace in which we now stand" (emphasis added). Other versions—the Revised Standard Version is an example—omit "by faith." This is not an example of any supposed tendency of the RSV editors to eliminate faith from the Bible, but only a reflection of the fact that the words *tē pistei* are omitted in some of the earliest Greek texts.

The words should probably be retained, as the New International Version does. But this does not really matter. Since "access" is a benefit of justification and since justification has already been explained as coming to us through faith, faith is implied here, even if it is not stated. Or, to look at it in another way, the sentence begins "through whom"—that is, "through Christ." But we have Christ only through faith, and therefore faith is demanded by this expression also.

No, the really difficult thing is not the textual variation, though it has given us different translations of the verse, but the meaning of the words themselves. There are a number of very important words in this verse: *access, faith, grace,* and *stand.* But these can be used in different ways, and it is not easy to see how they all go together in this sentence.

Let me make an attempt to define each one, taking them in the order I think will get us to the meaning of this verse most quickly.

1. *Grace.* Grace is usually defined as "God's unmerited favor," and that is sometimes rightly strengthened to read "God's favor to those who actually deserve the opposite." In this sense, grace is what lies behind God's entire plan of redemption. That is why

> Paul can use it in writing to the Ephesians, saying, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

But this is not the meaning of the word here. One clue to the fact that Paul is giving "grace" another meaning in Romans 5:2 is that he prefaces it with "this." "*This* grace!" "This" indicates that he has a specific grace in mind. Another clue is that Paul speaks of it as a grace "in which we now stand." What grace is that? In the context of Romans 5, it is clear that the grace in which we now stand is our state of justification. It still means grace. But it specifically means that, while we were previously "under law and wrath," we are now "under grace" because we stand before God as justified men and women—if we have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

2. *Faith.* Faith also has a variety of meanings. It always means "believing God and acting upon that belief." But the emphasis can be either upon the acting (being faithful) or upon the believing (taking God at his word), or it can relate to a variety of things we are called upon to believe. Since the word is linked to "grace" in this sentence and since this grace is the grace of justification, the faith referred to here is the faith in Jesus Christ by which we are justified.

In other words, "faith" in this verse has the same meaning as "faith" in verse 1, which is why I said earlier that it does not matter much whether the words "by faith" are omitted in line with the textual variants. The faith by which we are justified is implied throughout.

3. *Access.* The Greek term lying behind this word is *prosagōgē*, which can mean "access" or

"right to enter" or "freedom to enter" or even "introduction." Since it is used of the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer in Ephesians 2:18, it has sometimes been said that the Holy Spirit "introduces" us to God.

What does the word mean here? The important thing to see about its use in Romans 5:2 is that it is preceded by the verb "have gained" and that this verb is in the past perfect tense. The New International Version says "have gained" in order to make the point I am making. But the word is actually "have," and in the past perfect tense the proper translation is "have had." What Paul is therefore saying is that we "*have had* our access into the grace of justification." Paul uses this special past tense to show that the justification in which we stand is something that has been accomplished for us and into which we have already entered. It has a present significance, too, of course. But the reason it has a present significance is that it is something that has already happened to us. We have been justified; therefore we remain justified. We have had our access, and it is because of this that we still have it.

4. *Stand.* The final key word in Romans 5:2 is the verb "stand." By now we can see how it should be taken. By the mercy of God we have been brought into the grace of justification, and that is the grace in which we now have the privilege to stand. Before, we were standing without, as children of wrath. Now we are standing within, not as enemies or even as pardoned criminals, but as sons and daughters of Almighty God.

Can I sum this up? You will remember that in the last study, when we were attempting to get a handle on the central purpose of Paul in Romans 5-8, I pointed out that the overriding theme of these chapters is assurance. So, although there is a progression in these first benefits of being justified—from having peace with God, to access, to rejoicing in hope of the coming glory—all nevertheless are also evidence that we have been made secure in Christ, and that forever. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written, "We have entered... into a position of grace, we have had our introduction to God and we [now] stand before him in an entirely new manner."

Access to the King

In his short but valuable commentary on Romans, Ray C. Stedman illustrates the nature of our standing in grace by the Old Testament story

of Queen Esther.

Esther was a young Jewish woman living in the days following the fall of Jerusalem, as a result of which the majority of the Jewish people had been carried off to Babylon. At the time of her story, the king was Xerxes and he was ruling at Susa. Xerxes sought a bride to replace the deposed Queen Vashti and found one in Esther. She became his queen after being taken from the home of her cousin and guardian, Mordecai, to live in Xerxes' palace. A great enemy of the Jews named Haman was also living in the palace. Haman hatched a plot against the Jews in which Xerxes unwittingly signed a decree that would result in death for all the Jews in Persia. Mordecai got a message to Esther, telling her about the plot and saying that she must go to the king and tell him what was about to happen and prevent it.

Alas, explained Esther, there was a problem. It was a law of the Persians that no one could approach the king unbidden. If a person approached the king in the inner court without being summoned, there was only one result: death—unless the king held out his golden scepter to that person and thus spared his or her life. Although Queen Esther had not been summoned to the king for thirty days, even she could not approach him without danger of being put to death.

Mordecai explained to Esther that she had undoubtedly been brought to her royal position "for such a time as this" and that there was no one else who could intervene to save her people.

Esther agreed to go to the king. She spent three days in prayer and fasting, asking the Jews through Mordecai also to fast and pray with her. Then, at the end of her period of preparation, she put on her most royal robes and stepped into the king's inner hall. The king was sitting on his throne, facing the entrance. When he saw Esther he was so pleased with her beauty that he stretched out the scepter that was in his hand and thus accepted her. So Esther had access to the king, and through her the Jews were eventually spared.

This is what Paul says has happened to us through the work of Jesus Christ and the application of that work to us in our justification.

But the parallel is not exact, and for us the result is even more wonderful. Esther was beautiful, and the king was pleased with her. But, in our case, sin has made us highly offensive to God and we have not even tried to approach him. Still God has loved us. He sought us when we were far from him. He sent his Son to die for us, taking the punishment of our sin upon himself. Now, because of Christ's work, we have been brought into the palace where we enjoy God's favor and have continuing access to him.

The author of Hebrews puts it this way: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience..." (Heb. 10:19, 22).

Freedom and Confidence

That aforementioned verse from Hebrews obviously deals with prayer. This suggests that, although Romans 5:2 is not speaking explicitly about prayer (its concern is chiefly with assurance), all this obviously has bearing on our right to approach God in prayer and receive things from him.

Besides, we are encouraged in this thinking by the fact that one of the key words of Romans 5:2,
"access" (*prosagōgē*), occurs in two other passages in the New Testament and that each of these has to do with prayer. Both are in Ephesians. The first is Ephesians 2:18—"For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." The second is Ephesians 3:12—"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." These passages teach two things about prayer, which are based on the fact that we have been given access to God through his work of justification.

1. *Our access to God is direct.* I mean by this that we do not have to use mediators to get us to God, since the one true Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, has opened the door to heaven and given us access to the Father once and forever.

This truth is taught in the first of the two passages from Ephesians, for it comes at the end of a paragraph in which Paul has been referring to the barriers that once divided men and women from God and from each other. In the Jewish temple, to which he refers, there were walls designed to protect the approach to God. If you were to have approached the Temple Mount in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus Christ, you would have been confronted with a wall that divided the Courtyard of the Gentiles from what lay beyond. That wall meant what it said. No Gentile could go beyond it, and the penalty for thus violating the sanctity of the inner courtyard was death. Even the Romans upheld this penalty, and there were signs placed in warning, two of which have since been discovered and are in museums.

Jews could go forward, of course. But even Jewish worshipers would soon come to a second wall. This wall divided the Courtyard of the Women from the Courtyard of the Men. Here all Jewish women had to stop.

Beyond that was still another wall, and past it only Jewish priests could go. They could perform the sacrifices and enter the Holy Place of the temple. But here there was a final barrier, the great curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Beyond that barrier only one person could ever go, and that was the High Priest, who could enter only on the Day of Atonement to present the blood of the sacrifice that had been offered for the sins of the people moments before in the outer courtyard.

That elaborate system taught that the way to God was barred even for the elect people of Israel. God could be approached, but only through the mediation of the priests. Gentiles were without access at all, unless they first became Jews and approached by the Jewish route of priestly mediation.

But now, says Paul, those dividing walls of partition have been broken down, and the reason is that when Jesus died, God removed the ultimate barrier, the curtain that divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Do you remember how the great curtain was torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died on the cross (Matt. 27:51)? This signified that atonement for sin had been made and accepted. The barriers of sin were now gone for all who would approach God on the basis of the death of Christ. For these—everyone who has been justified by the grace of God in Chrise—evcess to God is now direct. There are no mediators needed, none save Jesus! Hence, we can come to God directly at any time of day or in any place and know that he hears us and will answer our prayers.

2. *Our access to God is effective.* This truth is taught by the second of the texts from Ephesians, for it emphasizes that through faith in Christ "we may approach God with freedom and confidence." Confidence in what? Obviously that he will hear us and answer our prayers according to his wise and perfect will.

We can pray wrongly, of course, and we often do. But when we pray according to the wise will of God, we can be confident that he will both hear us and answer our prayers.

My favorite story in this respect is about Martin Luther and his good friend and assistant Frederick Myconius. One day Myconius became sick and was expected to die within a short time. On his bed he wrote a loving farewell note to Luther, but when Luther received it he sat down instantly and wrote this reply: "I command thee in the name of God to live, because I still have need of thee in the work of reforming the church.... The Lord will never let me hear that thou art dead, but will permit thee to survive me. For this I am praying. This is my will, and may my will be done, because I seek only to glorify the name of God."

The words seem shocking to us, because we live in less fervent times. But Luther's prayer was clearly of God and therefore effective. For, although Myconius had already lost the ability to speak when Luther's

letter came, in a short time he revived, and he lived six more years, surviving Luther by two months.

Can we be bold in prayer, as Luther was? There is a hymn by John Newton, the former slavetrader and preacher, that puts it quite well:

> Come, my soul, thy suit prepare: Jesus loves to answer prayer.
> He himself has bid thee pray, Therefore will not say thee nay.
>
> Thou art coming to a King,
> Large petitions with thee bring. For his grace and power are such, None can ever ask too much.

Abba, Father

My final point does not come specifically from either Romans 5:2 or the texts in Ephesians, though it occurs later in Romans (8:15) and in Galatians 4:6. But it is important to remember it whenever we speak about praying. It is that our approach to God may be intimate. We know this because Jesus taught us to use the intimate term *abba*, meaning "daddy," when we pray. It is the term Jesus used when praying, and it is the term he passed on to us: "Our *Abba*, who art in heaven."

God may be our King—the greatest king of all—which is why we can be bold in bringing large requests to him. But he is also our dear heavenly Father, and the access that we have as a result of our justification through the work of Christ has brought us into his home as beloved sons and daughters.

Chapter 62.
Hope of Glory

Romans 5:1-2

Paul wrote the fifth chapter of Romans to teach those who have been justified by God through faith in Jesus Christ that they are secure in their salvation. We have already seen two initial ways he has done this.

He has spoken of the "peace" that has been made between God and ourselves by the work of Christ, and he has spoken of the "access" to God that we have been given as a result of that peace. In the final sentence of verse 2 we come to a third evidence of our security, namely that "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." What does that mean?

In an earlier study I pointed out that "hope of the glory of God" concerns our final destiny as believers, in a manner parallel to the great statement in Romans 8:30: "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." I pointed out that justification inevitably leads to glorification; that is, since God has justified us, he will also glorify us. Therefore, not only our present status, including both peace and access, but our final end, the hope of the glory of God, assure us that God's purposes for us will never be frustrated.

But this third benefit of justification is richer than anything I have expressed thus far, and for that reason, I want to take time to look at it carefully.

The Glory of Jesus Christ

I begin with the high priestly prayer of Jesus uttered just before his crucifixion:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.... I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.... Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

John 17:1, 4-5, 24

These verses teach that Jesus possessed a certain glory before his incarnation and laid this glory aside when he became man, but that now, having finished the earthly work God had given him to do, he was to take up that glory again. What was that glory? We have a few good

intimations of it in Scripture, and there are a number of references to it beyond that.

First, when Peter, James, and John were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, we read that Jesus "was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Matt. 17:2). This was not a full manifestation of his heavenly glory, but it was enough to dazzle and even frighten the disciples. Peter, especially, was amazed at what he saw. At the time he had only a foolish suggestion: "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" (v. 4). But Peter always remembered this experience and later wrote, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain" (2 Peter 1:16-18).

The second intimation of Jesus' heavenly glory was Paul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. That vision blinded Paul, and he was without sight for three days until God sent Ananias to heal him.

The glory of Jesus is a wonderful thing. So it is significant that in the Lord's great priestly prayer he asks not only that it might be restored to him following his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, which it clearly was, but also that those who belong to him might have the privilege of beholding him thus glorified. In light of this, when Paul speaks of "the hope of the glory of God" in Romans, at the very least he is looking forward to the time when we will see Jesus in the full manifestation of his glory. He had seen this glory on the way to Damascus and perhaps on one other occasion (2 Cor. 12:1-6), and he longed to see it again.

"Changed from Glory into Glory"

But we have to go further in understanding this idea, for it also has to do with the fact that we shall be glorified, as I suggested at the beginning. This is necessary, of course, because without our own glorification we would never be able to see the glory of the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

The best New Testament expression of this theme is 2 Corinthians 3:12-18, but to understand it we need to remember something that happened to Moses as a result of his having spent time with God on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:29-35). When Moses came down from the mountain his face glowed with a transferred brilliance, and this was so bright that the people were unable to look directly at him. To converse with them Moses had to cover his face with a veil until the heavenly glory faded.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul picks up on this story, suggesting that today the veil is actually over the hearts of unbelievers and that believers, by contrast, are themselves unveiled and are becoming increasingly glorious, rather than having the glory fade from them, which is what happened to Moses. He says, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (v. 18). This means that the experience of Christians is to become increasingly glorified even now. We are to become like the Lord Jesus Christ in his perfections.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has an excellent discussion of this progressive transformation, and one of its valuable features is his citing of hymns that use the idea of glory to express being transformed into Christ's likeness.

One of the best known of Charles Wesley's hymns is "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." The theme of this hymn is sanctification, and in it the sanctifying roles of the Son, Holy Spirit, and Father are reviewed successively while the corresponding progress of the believer is unfolded. The last verse says:

Finish, then, thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be: Let us see thy great salvation Perfectly restored in thee!
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

The central line, "changed from glory into glory," refers to the growth in holiness that is being achieved in believers now.

Here is another hymn, one by Isaac Watts: "Come, We That Love the Lord." One verse especially captures our idea, saying:

The men of grace have found Glory begun below;
Celestial fruits on earthly ground From faith and hope may grow.

The fact that we are going to be like Jesus one day is a marvelous expectation. But it is encouraging to know that this transformation has already begun for those who have been justified. In fact, sanctification proves to us that we are on the path to that glory.

The Glory of God

Yet I have still not reached the greatest part of the Christian's blessed hope, which I am expounding in this study.

Going back to Romans 5:2, we notice that, although Romans 5:2 is parallel to Romans 8:30 (as I have already indicated several times), the words Paul uses are not "glorification" or even "the glory of Jesus Christ," but "the glory of God." What is this "glory"? We have already touched on aspects of this word in treating the glory of Jesus. But glory is one of the richest concepts in the Bible, and for that reason it is worth backing up just a bit to define it more fully.

1. *The meaning of "glory" in Greek.* In the early days of the Greek language, when many Greek words were still developing freely, there was a verb (*dokeō*) that meant "to believe," "to think," or (in an intransitive form) "to seem," "to appear," or "to have the appearance of." Thus, the sentence *dokei moi* means "it seems

good to me." From this verb came the noun (*doxa*), which is the word we translate as "glory" but which in those early stages naturally referred to how a thing seems or appears to someone. In other words, it meant "an opinion." This early meaning of *doxa* has been preserved in such theological terms as orthodox, paradox, and heterodox. An orthodox statement is one in which a person holds a "right" opinion. A paradox is a "contrary" or inherently "contradictory" opinion. A heterodox opinion is one "other than" the right one.

In those early days the opinion one held could be either a good opinion or a bad one. But, as time went on, the word came to be used almost exclusively of a good opinion—it meant "renown," "reputation," or "honor"—and finally meant only the very best opinion of only the very best individuals. This is why the ancients came in time to speak of the "glory" of kings and eventually of God as "the King of glory" (Ps. 24:7-10). God is the King of glory because he is the most glorious of all beings. He is the one of whom only the highest opinions should be held.

When we express these high opinions of God what do we do? We "glorify" him, don't we? So, in this sense, to "glorify" God, "worship" God, and "praise" God are the same thing. To worship God means to assign him his true worth.

2. *The meaning of "glory" in Hebrew.* In the Hebrew language the words translated "glory" are a bit different, and to complicate matters a bit more, there are also two very distinct ideas. Nevertheless, it is important to have this background as well.

The common Hebrew word for "glory" is *kabod*. It is closest to the Greek word and is therefore (in the Septuagint) usually so translated. *Kabod* can mean "reputation" or "renown." But the root meaning actually refers to something that is "weighty" as opposed to something that is "weightless." We can define the glory of God in one sense by saying that God alone has real gravity or that he is the only really weighty being in the universe. To expand the idea a bit further, we can say that when the created order moves closer to God it takes on weight

—like matter rushing toward a black hole—and that when created things move away from him they become lighter. Thus, the idols are accounted as being mere "nothings" (they have no weight), and God's judgment upon godless rulers is expressed by God's saying, as in the case of King Belshazzar, "*Mene, mene, tekel, parsin*" (Dan. 5:25). *Tekel* meant "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting" (v. 27).

The other distinctly Hebrew idea is the *shekinah*. This was a visible manifestation of God's glory, generally understood as light so brilliant as to be unapproachable. This was the glory transferred to the face of Moses as a result of his having spent time with God on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:2935; cf. 2 Cor. 3:12-18), which I have previously noted. It was also the glory, veiled in a cloud, that descended to fill the Most Holy Place of the Israelites' wilderness tabernacle and later of the temple in Jerusalem (Exod. 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11).

With this important background in place, let me refer now to one of the most interesting stories in the Old Testament. Moses had led the people of Israel to Mount Sinai and there had received the law of God. But the time to move on was coming, and Moses was not at all sure of his ability to lead the people forward. He shared his anxiety with God, and God replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exod. 33:14).

Moses was still not satisfied. "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (vv. 15-16).

God said he would do what Moses asked. He would go with them.

Then Moses asked the most daring thing of all. "Show me your glory," he said.

To this God replied, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will

have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But... you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.... There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" (vv. 1923).

In these verses, seeing the glory of God and seeing the face of God are treated as identical. This means, in the final analysis, that "hope of the glory of God," the phrase Paul uses in Romans 5:2, is nothing less than what theologians have called the Beatific Vision. It is the vision of God —the goal of our faith, the climax.

So what Paul is telling us is that the boon for which Moses prayed, and for which the saints of the ages have longed for fervently, is to be ours, and it is to be ours because of our gracious justification by the Father. Those who have been justified will see God. Therefore, as Paul wrote elsewhere, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

A Sure and Certain Hope

I need to make two more points to unfold fully what Paul is getting at in this section of Romans. The first is that this glorious culmination of our salvation by God is certain.

I have been saying this in different ways ever since we began these studies of Romans 5, but it is especially necessary to emphasize this now because of Paul's use of the noun *hope* in our text: "*hope* of the glory of God." In our day "hope" is a rather weak word. One dictionary defines it pretty well when it says: "desire with expectation of obtaining what is desired," listing "trust" and "reliance" as synonyms. But in common speech we usually mean much less than this. We speak of "hoping against hope" or "hoping for the best," which implies that we

are not very hopeful. Or we even say, like John Milton, "Our final hope is flat despair" (*Paradise Lost*, book 2, line 139).

But this is not what hope means in the Bible, and even the dictionary definition (which I said was not bad) falls short of it. In the Bible, "hope" means certainty, and the only reason it is called hope rather than certainty is that we do not possess what is hoped for *yet*, although we will. Here are some examples of how "hope" is used in the New Testament:

- Acts 2:26-27—" '... my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave...'" (cf. Ps. 16:8-11).
- 1 Corinthians 13:13a—"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love."
- 2 Corinthians 1:a—"And our hope for you is firm...."
- Colossians 1:5—"The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven...."
- Colossians 1:27—"... Christ in you, the hope of glory."
- Titus 1:2—"... hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time."
- Titus 2:13—"While we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."
- Hebrews 6:19-20—"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf...."
- 1 Peter 1:3—"... [God] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

In each of those passages, hope refers to certainty. For even though we are not yet in full possession of what is hoped for, we are nevertheless certain of it, since it has been won for us by
Christ and has been promised to us by God "who does not lie." This is how Paul is speaking in

Romans 5:2 when he says, "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

And there is something else. The Greek word for "rejoice" is a common one in the New Testament, being used seventy-two times in Paul's writings alone. But this is not the word used here, though it is not incorrectly translated "rejoice." The word Paul used is *kauchōmetha*, which actually means "boast" or "glory in." So the meaning is even stronger than rejoicing. How could it be possible to boast, glory, or exult in our "hope of glory" if that end result were not absolutely certain?

Clearly, those who have been justified are to look forward to their final and full glorification with great confidence.

Purified by This Hope

There is one last point. In 1 John 3:1-3, the apostle is speaking of the return of Jesus Christ and of the fact that when he appears we shall be like him. He calls this our "hope," which is an appropriate use of the word, as we have already seen. But this is not only something having to do with the future, says John. Hope has a present significance, too. Here is how he puts it: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure*" (vv. 2-3, emphasis added). It is our hope, or confidence, that we will be like Jesus one day that motivates us to be like him now. It leads us to live as morally pure a life as possible.

I have already said that Romans 5-8 is not chiefly about sanctification. But it does not exclude it, and in fact the opposite is the case. These chapters are about assurance, about our certain hope. But for that very reason they also embrace our growth in holiness. It is because we know that we will be like the Lord one day that we must purify ourselves and strive to live for him now.

Chapter 63.
God's Purpose in Human Suffering

Romans 5:3-5

The fifth chapter of Romans lists the grounds on which a person who has been justified by God through faith in Jesus Christ can know that he is saved from sin and can be steadfast in that knowledge. Verses 1 and 2 have listed several ways a Christian can be sure of this. Verses 3-5 give one more reason. It is the way believers in Christ respond to the troubles, trials, and tribulations of this life.

Christians do have tribulations, just like anybody else.

How should they respond to these trials?

How does their response strengthen their confidence that they are truly converted persons?

Paul says that Christians respond to their trials by rejoicing in them, however strange, abnormal, or even irrational this may seem to unbelievers, and that this is itself another evidence of their salvation. His exact words are: "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

A Matter of Knowledge

Each of the words in these verses is of great importance, and we are going to look at some of them in detail. But if someone should ask me, "What is the most important word?" I would say that it is the word *know* in verse 3. The phrase reads, "because we know...." "Know" is important because knowledge is the secret to everything else in the sentence. Christians rejoice in suffering because of what they know about it.

You have all heard the tired atheistic rebuttal to Christian doctrine based upon the presence of suffering in the world. It has been expressed in different forms, depending on which unbeliever has uttered it. But one common form goes like this: "If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures happy, and if God were almighty he would be able to do what he wished. But his creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness or power or both." That objection is insulting in its simplicity, for it assumes that our lack of suffering is an ultimate good and that the only possible factors involved in our quandary are the alleged benevolence and alleged omniscience of God. The Christian *knows* that there is more to the problem than this.

Still, the problem of suffering is a big one, and it is not easy to answer it in a single essay or even in a single book.

A Number of Negatives

The place to begin is with some negatives, and the negatives we need to begin with are two nonChristian approaches to this problem.

1. *Epicureanism.* The first non-Christian approach to suffering goes by the name Epicureanism, from the name of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (342-270 B.C.). Epicurus taught that life is an inevitable mixture of good and bad experiences, and since there are always some bad experiences, which cannot be avoided, the way to handle them is by loading life with more pleasure than pain so that the bottom line is positive. This outlook is called "qualified hedonism." It is popular today. I suppose it is the basic "Yuppie" outlook or mentality. But, of course, this is not the Christian answer to unavoidable bad things.

2. *Stoicism.* The second inadequate answer also has a Greek name since it was developed by a body of Greek philosophers called Stoics. Their answer was what our English friends call "the stiff upper lip" or, as we say: trying to "grin and bear it."

Some years ago there was a war movie starring the quintessential Stoic actor, Jimmy Cagney. I forget the exact title of this film, but it involved a crew of air-force bomber pilots who were flying raids over Europe in support of the Allied invasion. Cagney was returning from one of these raids, but his plane had been fired upon and was damaged and it looked as if it would not be able to clear the cliffs of Dover and so be able to return to its base. The crew dropped everything they could to lighten the plane and give it height, but it was still too low. Finally the crew itself bailed out, leaving Cagney alone at the controls. The plane was close to the cliffs now, and they were looming larger and larger through the cockpit window. It was clear the plane was not going to make it. Finally, just as the plane got to the cliffs, Cagney leaned out the window and spit at the cliff—and a moment later the plane exploded in flame.

That is the Stoic temperament. It is the attitude of the man who takes whatever life brings to him and spits at fate. But, of course, this is not the approach of Christians any more than that of the Epicureans.

God's Many Purposes

I have called this chapter "God's Purpose in Human Suffering" because of the single purpose that Paul spells out in our text. But if the entire Word of God is to be taken into account, as I intend to do, it would be better to speak of "God's *purposes* in human suffering," since there are a number of them. Let me suggest a few as part of our general approach to this large topic.

1. *Corrective suffering.* The most obvious category of suffering for a Christian is what we can call corrective suffering, that is, suffering that is meant to get us back onto the path of righteousness when we have strayed from it. We have an example from family life in the spankings given to young children when they disobey and do wrong. If a child needs a spanking, he should receive one, and if he has the right kind of father or mother, he does. Why? Is it because the parent likes to inflict pain? Are good parents all naturally sadists? Not at all! Rather, they understand that a child has to learn that he or she is not free to do whatever seems desirable irrespective of the needs or feelings of others,

and that there are painful consequences whenever anyone persists in wrongdoing.

It is the same in the case of the divine Father and those who are his spiritual children. The author of Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:11-12—" 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son' "—concluding that we should: "Endure hardship as discipline.... For what son is not disciplined by his father?" (Heb. 12:5-7).

I mention this form of suffering first, for the first thing we should do when suffering comes into our lives is ask God whether or not it is intended by him for our correction. If it is, we need to confess our wrongdoing and return to the path of righteousness.

2. *Suffering for the glory of God.* A second important reason for suffering in the lives of some Christians is God's glory. Therefore, although when *we* suffer we should always ask God whether or not the suffering is for our correction, we should never blithely assume that this is necessarily what God is doing in the life of someone else. On the contrary, another person's suffering may be an evidence only of God's special favor to him or her.

How can that be?

Well, in John 9 we are told of the healing of a man who had been blind from birth. The blind man was apparently sitting at one of the gates of the temple when Jesus and his disciples passed by. The disciples made the mistake I just referred to, supposing that the man's sufferings were the result of a one-to-one relationship to some sin. They asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (v. 3). Clearly, Jesus was teaching that the sole cause of this man's having

spent the many long years of his life in blindness was so that, at this moment, Jesus might heal him and thus bring glory to God.

That idea is hard for many people to accept, particularly non-Christians. But it is not so difficult when we remember that life is short when measured by the scope of eternity and that our chief end is to glorify God—by whatever means he may choose to have us do it.

It was this knowledge that enabled Hugh Latimer to cry out to Nicolas Ridley as they were being led to the stake in Oxford, England, in 1555, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as (I trust) shall never be put out."

Only those who have their eyes on eternity can assume this perspective.

3. *Suffering as a part of cosmic warfare.* A third kind of suffering is illustrated by the story of Job from the Old Testament. The story begins with Job as a happy and favored man, with a fine family and many possessions. But suddenly he suffered the loss of his many herds and the death of his ten children, and he did not know why. His friends came to try to help him sort it through. In fact, the Book of Job is a record of the limitations of human reasoning in wrestling through these tough problems. But *we* know why Job suffered, because the book tells us why at the very beginning. It was because of a conflict between Satan and God. Satan had made the accusation that Job loved and served God only because God had blessed Job physically. "But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face," said Satan (Job 1:11).

God knew that this was not so. But he allowed Satan to have his way to show that Job loved God for himself and not for what he could get out of him. Job lost everything, but in a posture of abject mourning he nevertheless worshiped God, saying: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (v. 21). Then we

are told: "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (v. 22).

This story explains a great deal (perhaps most) of the suffering some Christians endure. I imagine that for every believer who is suffering with a particular form of cancer there is also a nonbeliever in exactly the same condition and that the Christian praises and worships God in spite of his afflictions while the unbeliever curses God and bitterly resents his fate. God is showing that the purpose of life lies in a right relationship to him and not in pleasant circumstances. For every Christian who loses a son or daughter there is a non-Christian who experiences the same thing. For every Christian who loses a job there is a non-Christian in like circumstances. This is the explanation of life's struggles, in my opinion. It is the ultimate reason for the drama of history.

4. *Constructive suffering.* The fourth purpose of God in suffering is what Paul presents in Romans 5, namely, that God uses our troubles, trials, and tribulations to form Christian character.

Evangelist Billy Graham illustrated this by a story from the Great Depression. A friend of his had lost a job, a fortune, a wife, and a home. But he was a believer in Jesus Christ, and he hung to his faith tenaciously even though he could see no purpose in what was happening and was naturally oppressed by his circumstances. One day in the midst of his depression he was wandering through the city and stopped to watch masons doing stonework on a huge church. One was chiseling a triangular piece of stone. "What are you doing with that?" he asked.

The workman stopped and pointed to a tiny opening near the top of a nearly completed spire. "See that little opening up there near the top of the spire?" he said. "Well, I'm shaping this down here so that it will fit in up there." Graham's friend said that tears filled his eyes as he walked away, for it seemed to him that God had spoken to say that he was shaping him for heaven through his earthly ordeal.

The Benefits of Suffering

Having approached our subject from the perspective of God's purposes, we are now ready to see what Paul says suffering will do in the lives of Christians, and why this is reassuring. What benefits does suffering bring?

First, it produces *perseverance.* You may notice another word used to translate this idea in your Bible—if you are using other than the New International Version—because the word seems to most translators to call for a richness of expression. Some versions say "patience," others "endurance," still others "patient endurance."

The full meaning of this word emerges when we consider it together with the word for
"suffering," which occurs just before it in the Greek text and which is what Paul says produces "patience" (KJV). There are a number of words for suffering in the Greek language, but this one is *thlipsis*, which has the idea of pressing something down. It was used for the effect of a sledge as it threshed grain, for instance. The sledge pressed down the stalks and thus broke apart the heads to separate the chaff from the grain. *Thlipsis* was also used of crushing olives to extract their oil or of grapes to press out wine.

With that in mind, think now of "perseverance." The word translated "perseverance" is *hypomonē*. The first part of this word is a prefix meaning "under" or "below." The second part is a word meaning an "abode" or "living place." So the word as a whole means to "live under something." If we take this word together with the word for tribulation, we get the full idea, which is to live under difficult circumstances without trying, as we would say, to wriggle out from under them. We express the idea positively when we say, "Hang in there, brother." It is hanging in when the going gets tough, as it always does sooner or later.

So here is one thing that separates the immature person from the mature one, the new Christian from one who has been in the Lord's school longer. The new believer tries to avoid the difficulties and get out from

under them. The experienced Christian is steady under fire and does not quit his post.

Second, just as suffering produces steady perseverance, so (according to Paul) does perseverance produce *character.* Other versions translate this word as "experience." But again, it is richer even than these two very useful renderings.

The Greek word is *dokimē*, but *dokimē* is based on the similar word *dokimos*, which means something "tested" or "approved." There is an illustration that Paul himself provides. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul is speaking of self-discipline and says, "... I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." The word *disqualified* is our word, but with a negative particle in front of it. This suggests an image from the ancient world. Silver and gold coins were made quite roughly in those days, not milled to exact sizes as our coins are, and people would often cheat with them by carefully trimming off some of the excess metal. We know they did this because hundreds of laws were passed against the practice. After people had trimmed away enough metal, they would sell it for new coins.

When coins had been trimmed for a long time, they eventually got so light that the merchants would not take them anymore; then a coin was said to be *adokimos*, "disqualified." This is what Paul is referring to. He is saying that he does not want to be disqualified, but rather to be judged "fit" as a result of his sufferings and self-discipline.

It is the same in our Romans text, where Paul says that the sufferings of life or the pressures of merely trying to live for Christ in our godless environment produce endurance, which in turn proves that we are fit.

I think of it another way, too. A disapproved coin is a light coin, and I remember (from the previous study) that this is what happens to us when we draw away from God. We become increasingly weightless. But when we draw closer to God and he to us, working in us what is

well pleasing to himself, we become "weighty," as he is. We become approved persons of great value.

Ray Stedman, who discusses these benefits well in his Romans commentary, tells at this point of a time he once asked a nine-year-old-boy, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The boy said, "A returned missionary."

He did not want to be just a missionary, but a returned one—one who had been through the fires, had them behind him, and was shown to have been of real value in God's work.

Finally, Paul indicates that the steadfast, approved character created by perseverance in its turn produces *hope*. Here we have come full circle. We started with hope. We saw it as an assurance of what will one day be ours, though we do not possess it yet. Then we looked at our sufferings. We saw why we can rejoice in them. It is because they lead to endurance, endurance to an approved character, and character to an even more steadfast hope. And all this is further evidence of our security in Christ—when we share in Christ's sufferings and embrace them in like fashion.

The Church in China

Some years ago I had an opportunity to publish an article on suffering by one of the missionaries of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Dr. Jonathan Chao, an acknowledged expert on the state of the church in China. It made a comparison between the growth of the Chinese church during the relatively peaceful years of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and the years since 1950, when the Communists took over. By the end of the "missionary period," there were approximately 840,000 Christians in China. Today, however, after forty years of the most intense persecutions and suffering, the Chinese church, according to Chao's calculations, numbers fifty million. In Chao's opinion, it was the suffering of the church that produced character, the ability not only

to survive the persecutions, but also to win many others even in hard times.

I mention this background for the sake of the following story. In this same article Chao told of an
American student who came to Hong Kong to study the Chinese church. Before he had left the States a friend had asked him, "If God loves the Chinese church so much, why did he allow so much suffering to come upon it?"

The student confessed that he had no answer at the time. But after he had traveled to China and had made extensive and meaningful contacts with a number of Chinese Christians, he discovered an answer that he put like this: "Mr. Chao, I am going back to America and ask my friend this question: If God loves the American church so much, why hasn't he allowed us to suffer like the church in China?"

It is a good question, because, according to the Bible, suffering is not harmful; on the contrary, it is a beneficial experience. It is beneficial because it accomplishes the beneficent purposes of Almighty God. It is part of all those circumstances that work "for the good of those who love him..." (Rom. 8:28).

Chapter 64.
God's Love Commended

Romans 5:6-8

There are a number of preachers today, some of them quite famous, who do not want to say anything unpleasant about sinful human nature. They describe their approach to Christianity as "possibility thinking" and argue that people are already so discouraged about themselves that they do not need to be told that they are wicked. I do not know how such preachers could possibly preach on our text.

They should want to, I think, Romans 5:6-8 (and verse 5, which precedes this paragraph) speak about the love that God has for us. The

greatness of this love, which is mentioned here in Romans for the very first time, is an uplifting and positive theme. Besides, it is brought into the argument at this point to assure us that all who have been justified by faith in Christ have been saved because of God's love for them and that nothing will ever be able to separate them from it. This is the climax to which we will also come at the end of Romans 8. Nothing could be more positive or more edifying than this theme. Yet Paul's statement of the nature, scope, and permanence of God's love is placed against the black backdrop of human sin, and rightly so. For, as Paul tells us: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8).

How can we appreciate or even understand that statement without speaking about the evil natures of those whom God has thus loved?

This is a very practical matter for two reasons. First, since Paul is describing the love of God against the dark background of human sin, he is saying that it is only against this background that we are able to form a true picture of how great the love of God is. In other words, if we think (as many do) that God loves us because we are somehow quite lovely or desirable, our appreciation of the love of God will be reduced by just that amount—just as a beautiful but very vain woman might have trouble appreciating the love of her husband, or of anyone else. If we think we deserve the best of everything, we will not appreciate the love we receive irrespective of our beauty, talent, or other supposedly admirable qualities.

The second point is this: If we think we deserve God's love, we cannot ever really be secure in it, because we will always be afraid that we may do something to lessen or destroy the depth of God's love for us. It is only those who know that God has loved them *in spite of* their sin who can trust him to continue to show them favor.

God's Love for Sinners

I begin with Paul's description of the people God loves and has saved, and I ask you to notice the four powerful words used to portray them,

three in the passage we are studying and one additional word in verse 10. They are "powerless," "ungodly," "sinners," and "enemies." It is important to know that we are all rightly described by each of these words.

1. *Powerless.* This word is translated in a variety of ways in our Bible versions: "weak,"

"helpless," "without strength," "feeble," "sluggish in doing right," and so on. Only the strongest terms will do in this context, since the idea is that, left to ourselves, none of us is able to do even one small thing to please God or achieve salvation.

One commentator distinguishes between "conditional impossibilities" and "unconditional impossibilities" in order to show that this kind of inability is truly unconditional. A conditional impossibility is one in which we are unable to do something *unless* something else happens. For example, I might find it impossible to repay a loan *unless* I should suddenly earn a large sum of money. Or I might be unable to accept an invitation to some social event *unless* a prior commitment is canceled. An unconditional impossibility is one which no possible change in circumstances can alter, and it is this that describes us in our pre-converted state.

What specifically were we unable to do? We were unable to understand spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:14). We were unable to see the kingdom of God or enter it (John 3:3, 5). We were unable to seek God (Rom. 3:11). Paul elsewhere describes this inability vividly when he says that before God saved us we were "dead in [our] transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). That is, we were no more able to respond to or seek God than a corpse is able to respond to stimuli of any kind.

2. *Ungodly.* This word conveys the same idea Paul expressed at the beginning of his description of the race in its rebellion against God: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18).

In these verses, "ungodly" and "godlessness" mean not so much that human beings are unlike
God (though that is also true), but that in addition they are in a state of fierce opposition to him. God is sovereign, but they oppose him in his sovereignty. They do not want him to rule over them; they want to be free to do as they please. God is holy, and they oppose him in his holiness. This means that they do not accept his righteous and proper moral standards; they do not want their sinful acts and desires to be called into question. God is omniscient, and they oppose him for his omniscience. They are angry that he knows them perfectly, that nothing they think or do is hidden from his sight. They also oppose him for his immutability, since immutability means that God does not change in these or any of his other attributes.

3. *Sinners.* "Sinners" describes those who have fallen short of God's standards, as Romans 3:23 says: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It means that we have broken God's law and in this sense is probably parallel to the word *wickedness* in Romans 1:18, which was cited above. "Godlessness" is being opposed to God; that is, to have broken the first table of the law, which tells us that we are to worship and serve God only (cf. Matt. 22:37-38). "Wickedness" means to have broken the second table of the law; we have failed to treat others properly, to have respected them, and to have loved them as we love ourselves (cf. Matt. 22:39).

4. *Enemies.* The final word Paul uses to describe human beings apart from the supernatural work of God in their lives is "enemies," though the word does not appear until verse 10. This summarizes what has been said by the first three terms, but it also goes beyond that. It affirms that not only are we unable to save ourselves, are unlike and opposed to God, and are violators of his law, but we are also opposed to God in the sense that we would attack him and destroy him if we could. Being like Satan in his desires, we would drag God from his throne, cast him to hell and crush him into nothingness—if that were possible—

> which is what many people actually tried to do when God came among them in the person of Jesus Christ.

What a terrible picture of humanity! No wonder the possibility thinkers choose other, more uplifting themes to speak about!

Yet it is only against this background that we see the brightness of God's love. "You see," writes Paul, "at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (vv. 6-8).

Love at the Cross

Any contrast has two sides, of course, and thus far we have looked only at one side. We have looked at the dark side: ourselves. We have seen that God loved us, not when we were lovely people who were seeking him out and trying to obey him, but when we were actually fighting him and were willing to destroy him if we could. That alone makes the measure of God's love very great. However, we may also see the greatness of the love of God by looking at the bright side: God's side. And here we note that God did not merely reach out to give us a helping hand, bestowing what theologians call common grace—sending rain on the just and unjust alike (cf. Matt. 5:45), for instance—but that he actually sent his beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for us.

There is a further contrast, too, as Paul brings these great ideas together and compares what God has done in dying for sinners with what human beings might themselves do in certain circumstances. Paul points out that, while a human being might be willing to give his life for a righteous or, better yet, a morally superior woman or man under certain circumstances, Jesus died for us while we were still sinners, which is the precise opposite of being good, or righteous.

In his excellent study of this text Donald Grey Barnhouse gives two illustrations of exceptionally great human love.

In one story two men were trapped in a mine cave-in, and poisonous gas was escaping. One man had a wife and three children. He also had a gas mask, but his mask had been torn in the underground explosion and he would have perished apart from the act of the man who was trapped with him. This second man took off his own mask and forced it on the man who survived, saying, "You have Mary and the children; they need you. I am alone and can go." When we hear of an act like this, we sense we are on hallowed ground.

The other story concerns a tough youngster from the streets of one of our large cities. His sister had been crippled and needed an operation. The operation was provided for her. But after the operation the girl needed a blood transfusion, and the boy, her brother, was asked to volunteer. He was taken to her bedside and watched tight-lipped as a needle was inserted into his vein and blood was fed into his sister's body. When the transfusion was over, the doctor put his arm on the boy's shoulder and told him that he had been very brave. The youngster knew nothing about the nature of a blood transfusion. But the doctor knew even less about the actual bravery of the boy—until the boy looked up at him and asked steadily, "Doc, how long before I croak?" He had gotten the idea that he would have to die to save his sister, and he had thought that he was dying drop by drop as his blood flowed into her veins. But he did it anyway!

These stories sober us, because in them we recognize something of the highest human love. Yet, when we read of the love of God in Romans 5, we learn that it was not for those who were close to him or who loved him that Jesus died—but for those who were opposed to God and were his enemies. It is on this basis that God commends his love to us.

An Argument for Hard Hearts

Isn't it astounding that God should need to commend his love to us? We are told in the Bible, though we should know it even without being told, that all good gifts come from God's hands (James 1:17). It is from God that we receive life and health, food and clothing, love from and fellowship with other people, and meaningful work. These blessings

should prove the love of God beyond any possibility of our doubting it. Yet we do doubt it. We are insensitive to God's love, and God finds it necessary to commend his love by reminding us of the death of his Son.

So it is at the cross that we see the love of God in its fullness. What a great, great love this is!

You may recall that when the Swiss theologian Karl Barth was in this country some years before his death, someone asked a question at one of his question-and-answer sessions that went like this: "Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever gone through your mind?"

The questioner probably expected some complicated and incomprehensible answer, as if Einstein were being asked to explain the theory of relativity. But after he had thought a long while, Barth replied by saying: "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

This was a profound answer and a correct one. For there is nothing greater that any of us could think about or know than that Jesus loves us and has shown his love by dying in our place.

The Greatness of God's Love

I would like to close this study by reflecting on the greatness of God's love for us, but I wonder how anyone can do that adequately. How can any merely human words sufficiently express this wonder?

Some years ago I was preaching through the Gospel of John and had come to that greatest of all verses about the love of God: John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." I wanted to say that the love of God is great, remembering that Ephesians 2:4 uses that very word: "But because of his *great* love for us...." But the English word *great* is not great enough for this subject. The week before, I had been at Houghton College in New York, and I remembered having said that I thought the work of the college was *great,* that some of the points the other speakers had made were *great,* and that I had had a *great* time. I was sincere in my use of the word *great.* But what were

such uses of the word compared to the use of the word to describe God's love?

Someone once tried to express the greatness of God's love by printing on a little card a special arrangement of John 3:16, with certain descriptive phrases added. The twelve parts of the verse were arranged down one side of the card, and the added phrases were printed across from them. It went like this:

God the greatest Lover

so loved	the greatest degree
the world	the greatest company
that he gave	the greatest act
his only begotten Son	the greatest gift
that whosoever	the greatest opportunity
believeth	the greatest simplicity
in him	the greatest attraction
should not perish	the greatest promise
but	the greatest difference
have	the greatest certainty
everlasting life	the greatest possession

The title placed over the whole was: "Christ—the Greatest Gift."

Let me try to express the greatness of the love of God by the words of a hymn by F. M. Lehman. Lehman wrote most of this hymn, but the final stanza (the best, in my opinion) was added to it later, after it had been found scratched on the wall of a room in an asylum by a man said to

have been insane. The first and last verses of the hymn and the chorus, go as follows:

> The love of God is greater far
> Than tongue or pen can ever tell; It goes beyond the highest star, And reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave his Son to win: His erring child he reconciled And rescued from his sin.
> Could we with ink the ocean fill,
> And were the skies of parchment made;
> Were every stalk on earth a quill,
> And every man a scribe by trade;
> To write the love of God above
> Would drain the ocean dry;
> Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
> Tho stretched from sky to sky.
>
> Oh, love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall forevermore endure— The saints' and angels' song.

Did you know that the love of God seemed so great to the biblical writers that they invented, or at least raised to an entirely new level of meaning, a brand-new word for love?

The Greek language was rich in words for love. There was the word *storgē*, which referred to affection, particularly within the family. There was *philia*, from which we get "philharmonic" and "philanthropy" and the place name "Philadelphia." It refers to a love between friends. A third word was *erōs*, which has given us "erotic," and which referred to sexual love. This was a rich linguistic heritage. Yet, when the Old Testament was translated into Greek and when the New Testament writers later wrote in Greek, they found that none of these common Greek words was able to express what they wanted. They therefore took another word without strong associations and poured their own, biblical meaning into it. The new word was *agapē*, which thereby came to mean

the holy, gracious, sovereign, everlasting, and giving love of God that we are studying here.

Alas, I feel that even yet I have not begun to explain how great the love of God is. There is nothing to be done but to go back to our text and read again: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Perhaps I should say one more thing on this subject: If you do not yet fully appreciate (or perhaps have not even begun to appreciate) the greatness of the love God has for you, the explanation is probably that you have never really thought of yourself as God saw you in your fallen state.

Perhaps you have never thought of yourself as someone who was utterly without strength or powerless before God saved you.

Perhaps you have never considered yourself to have been ungodly.

Nor a sinner.

Nor God's enemy.

But that is what you were—and still are if you have never come to Christ in order to be justified. It is only if you can recognize the truth of these descriptions that you can begin to appreciate the love that God holds out to you through the death of his Son.

If you have never responded to this great overture of the divine love, let me encourage you to do that, assuring you that there is no greater truth in all the universe. Can you think of anything greater? Of course, you can't. How could anybody? God loves you. Jesus died for you. Let those truly great thoughts move you to abandon your sin, love God in return, and live for Jesus.

Chapter 65.
Full Salvation

Romans 5:9-11

I have been expounding Romans 5:1-11 for five studies now—this is the sixth—and in every one of these studies I have said that the point of these verses is to assure Christians of their salvation.

They are to know that they are eternally secure in Christ so that they might be able to rejoice in God fully. In this study we find the same idea. I might be inclined to apologize for this repetition were it not for the fact that this is clearly the emphasis of the chapter—and that it is going to continue in one form or another until the end of chapter 8.

This has not been mere repetition, however, since the thesis (which *is* repeated) has been supported by a variety of arguments:

1. We can be assured of salvation because God has made peace with us through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.
2. We can be assured of salvation because, through that same work of Christ, we have been brought into a new relationship with God in which we continue to stand.
3. We can be assured of salvation because of the sure and certain hope that we shall see God.
4. We can be assured of salvation because of the way we are able to react to sufferings in this life. We see God's purposes in them and therefore rejoice in them, which unbelievers cannot do.
5. We can be assured of salvation because God sent Jesus Christ to die for us, not when we were saved people, as we are now, but when we were God's sworn enemies.

In this last section, Paul provides yet another argument or, what is probably more accurate to say, draws his previous arguments together: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall

we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Sound Logic

In the sayings that have come down to us from the great Rabbi Hillel there are some principles for Bible interpretation that Paul, as a Jewish thinker, frequently used in his writings. One is called *qal w'chomer*, from the Hebrew words for "light" and "heavy." It refers to a form of arguing in which, if a lesser thing is true, a greater thing must clearly be true also. Here is an example from the teaching of Jesus: "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:11). Obviously, if we who are evil know how to do good to those who are close to us (this is the "light" part of the comparison), God, who is utterly good (this is the "heavy" part), will do good to his children.

A second principle related to the light/heavy argument is the opposite, an argument from the "heavy" to the "light." It argues that if something great is true, then something lesser in the same category will obviously be true also. Paul uses this principle twice in these verses:

1. "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (v. 9), and
2. "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life!" (v. 10).

Each of these arguments is based upon things God has already done for us through the death of Christ. They are great works: justification on the one hand, and reconciliation on the other. They are so great that they are

used by God to commend his love to us, as Paul stated earlier. But if God has already done such great works on our behalf, justifying us in Christ when we were ungodly and reconciling us to himself when we were his enemies, God will obviously continue his work in the lesser task of seeing us through life and through the final judgment.

Saved from God's Wrath

When we look at verse 9, we have a tendency to think that we have already heard everything this verse has to teach. After all, "wrath" is the term we began with back in Romans 1:18, and the doctrine of "justification" was developed fully and compellingly in Romans 3. Besides, Romans 5:9 seems to be almost an identical repeat of verse 1 of this chapter. It is true, of course, that this is the first time we have encountered the word *saved* in the letter. But what have we been talking about all this time if it has not been salvation?

To understand what is happening we have to realize that "saved" is used in at least three different ways in the Bible, in three different tenses. Sometimes it refers to something past, at other times to something present, sometimes to things yet to come.

Let me illustrate. Suppose you are a Christian and that someone asks you, "Are you saved?"

How do you respond? I suppose you would most likely just say, "Yes, I am." But it would be possible for you to answer in three different ways, the answer you gave ("Yes, I am") being only one of them. If you are thinking of what Jesus accomplished on your behalf by dying for you on the cross, it would be correct to have answered as you did, for Jesus did save you by his substitutionary death.

But if you are thinking of the present and of what God is accomplishing in you day by day, it would also be correct to say, "I am being saved." Paul himself uses the word this second way in 1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but

to us who are being saved it is the power of God." This verse means that God works through the power of the cross to save us from sin now.

Third, you could think in future terms and answer the question by saying, "No, I am not saved yet, but I will be when Jesus returns." In this case you would be looking forward to your future glorification when the work begun in the past by Jesus and continued into the present by the power of the Holy Spirit, who works in us, will be perfected. In that day we will be delivered even from the presence of sin and made like Jesus forever.

I mention these three tenses of the word, because it is important to see that it is in the third sense, the future sense of salvation, that Paul speaks here. He is not denying the other tenses, particularly not the first. But he is thinking of the judgment to come and is saying that because we have already been justified by God on the basis of the death of Christ, we can be certain of being saved from the outpouring of God's wrath in the final day. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The apostle's argument is that this method, this way of salvation that God has planned, is a complete whole, and therefore, if we have been justified by Christ's blood we are joined to Christ, we are in Christ, and we shall therefore be saved by him completely and perfectly."

Or we could put it like this: If God has already justified us on the basis of Jesus' atoning death, if he has already pronounced his verdict, any verdict rendered at the final judgment will be only a confirming formality.

Reconciled

Arguing from the "heavy" to the "light" is, if anything, even more apparent in verse 10, where Paul speaks of reconciliation. I begin with the "heavy" part. What is this "heavy" thing God has done for us?

It is the very work we were looking at in detail in the last study. There we were dealing with the love of God, and we saw that the basis upon which God commends his love to us is that it caused him to send his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for us while we were yet sinners. Our

sinfulness was spelled out in three powerful terms, and these (as we saw) are followed by a fourth term in verse 10. Paul describes us as powerless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies. Let us review those terms:

1. *"Powerless"* means that we are unable to help ourselves. It is what theologians mean by total depravity, not that we are all as bad as we could possibly be, but that we are all equally and totally incapable of doing anything to save ourselves. We are not able to seek out and eventually come even to understand the way of salvation.

2. *"Ungodly"* means that we are opposed to God in his godly nature. We do not like him for being who he is.

3. *"Sinners"* means that we are violators of God's moral law, particularly that second table of the law meant to govern our conduct toward other persons.

4. *"Enemies,"* the word used in the verses we are studying now, is the worst term of all. It means not only that we dislike God in his godly nature, but that we are so opposed to God in that nature that we would destroy him if we could. Like a soldier approaching his counterpart in an enemy army in wartime, we consider it a matter of "kill or be killed." We think of God's law as suffocatingly oppressive and destructive of who we want to be. So we are set on destroying God or at least destroying his influence so far as the living of our lives is concerned.

But, says Paul, it is while we were like this that God reconciled us to himself through Jesus' death. "Reconcile" means to remove the grounds of hostility and transform the relationship, changing it from one of enmity to one of friendship. In our case, as Paul has shown earlier, it meant taking us out of the category of enemies and bringing us into God's family as privileged sons and daughters. If God did that for us while we were enemies, Paul reasons, he is certainly going to save us from the final outpouring of his wrath on the day of judgment, now that we are family members.

If God has done the greater thing, he will do the lesser. If he has saved us while we were enemies, he will certainly save us as friends.

Rejoice in God

The last verse of our text, which also marks the end of the first half of Romans 5, says that now, having been reconciled to God, "we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ...."

There is a sense in which this idea returns us to where we started out, since the first sentence of Romans 5 speaks of just such a rejoicing: "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." But careful reading will show that the object of our rejoicing is not the same in both cases. In verse 2, our rejoicing is in "hope of the glory of God." That is, it is in our glorification. Knowing that we are going to be glorified is a cause of great joy for us. However, in verse 11, the object of our rejoicing is not our glorification, important as that is, but God himself who will accomplish it. And, of course, of the two ideas the second is obviously the greater. To rejoice in God is the greatest of all human activities.

We affirm this in the response to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Question: "What is the chief end of man?"

Answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

Up to this point I have not marked the number of ways and times Paul has referred to God in the first half of Romans 5, but this is the place to do it. In the first paragraph, he has referred to each person of the Trinity: "... we have peace with *God* through our *Lord Jesus Christ*.... And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.... And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by *the Holy Spirit*..." (vv. 1-2, 5, emphasis added). In the passage as a whole, the Holy Spirit is referred to once, God the Father seven times, and the Lord Jesus Christ five times, plus four more times in which Jesus is referred to by a personal pronoun.

What exactly shall we rejoice in, if we are to "rejoice in God"? We can rejoice in any one or all of his attributes. Our passage suggests these:

1. *God's wisdom.* Several chapters further on in Romans, after Paul has traced the marvels of God's great and gradually unfolding salvation work in history, he will cry out: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33). But even at this point in our study we can marvel at a wisdom so great as to be able to save powerless, ungodly, sinful enemies.

The question is: How can God save sinners without ignoring or otherwise condoning their sin? How can he save those who are filthy without dirtying himself? How can he be both just and the justifier of the ungodly? The answer is: through Christ, through his death for us. But we would not have known this or even have been able to suggest it by ourselves. It took the wisdom of the all-wise God to devise such a plan of salvation.

There is also a special display of God's wisdom in the way suffering works for our good, as Paul has shown in verses 3 and 4.

2. *God's grace.* Grace is usually defined as God's favor to the undeserving. But we rejoice in God's grace because, in our case, grace is favor not merely to the undeserving but to those who actually deserve the opposite. What do "enemies" deserve, after all? They deserve defeat and destruction. God did not treat us that way, however. Rather, he saved us through the work of Christ.
3. *God's power.* We often forget God's power when we think about salvation, reserving this theme for when we contemplate creation. But the Scripture speaks of God's power being displayed preeminently at the cross. In fact, the earliest reference to the cross in the Bible does this: Genesis 3:15. In this verse God is speaking to Satan, describing what will happen when the Mediator comes: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." In this verse the cross is portrayed as a battlefield

on which Satan and his hosts will be defeated. And so it was! The power of God was revealed at the cross when Satan's power over us was broken. We rejoice in God's power when we think of the cross, as well as in his other attributes.

4. *God's love.* There are a number of attributes of God that may be learned from nature, chiefly his power and wisdom, and perhaps his grace. But the only place we can learn of God's love is at the cross. Perhaps that is why this attribute is the only one explicitly developed in our passage: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8). It is when we look to the cross that we begin to understand what love is and how much God has loved us.

5. *God's immutability.* Several times in these studies I have referred to immutability as something for which unregenerate men and women hate God, because he does not change in any of his other attributes. But it is important to say that, although in our unregenerate state we may hate God for his unchanging nature, in our regenerate state we find this something to rejoice in, since it means that God will not waver in his love and favor toward us. Having loved us and having sent the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sin, God will not now somehow suddenly change his mind and cast us off. His love, grace, wisdom, and other attributes will always remain as they have been, because he is immutable.

Arthur W. Pink wrote of God's immutability: "Herein is solid comfort. Human nature cannot be relied upon; but God can! However unstable I may be, however fickle my friends may prove, God changes not. If he varied as we do, if he willed one thing today and another tomorrow, if he were controlled by caprice, who could confide in him? But, all praise to his glorious name, he is ever the same."

Do We Rejoice?

The last verse of this section says, "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ...." This is a positive

statement: "We rejoice!" It has led one commentator to say, "The one clear mark of a true Christian is that he always rejoices." But do we rejoice? Have we actually come as far as Paul assumes we have in verse 11? Honesty compels us to admit that often we do not rejoice in God.

Why is that? D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives a number of reasons, which I list for the sake of our self-examination:

1. A failure to grasp the truth of justification by faith only.
2. A failure to meditate as we ought, that is, a failure to think about what we do know.
3. A failure to draw the necessary conclusions from the Scriptures.

I do not know if these are your failures (if you have failed to rejoice in God) or whether there is some other hindrance in your case, as there may be. But whatever the cause, anything that keeps us from rejoicing in God is inappropriate and should be overcome by us. I challenge you to overcome it. I challenge you to think about these great truths, meditate upon them, learn how great the love, power, wisdom, and grace of God toward you are. Then glory in God, as those who have known God throughout the long ages of human history have done before you. It will make a profound difference in your life, and you will be a blessing to others.

Part Seven. Union with Christ

Chapter 66.
Union with Jesus Christ

Romans 5:12

The last ten verses of Romans 5 are a new section of the letter. They deal with mankind's union with Adam on the one hand, a union which has led to death and condemnation, and with the believer's union with the Lord Jesus Christ on the other. This latter union leads to life and righteousness. This is a difficult section of the letter, possibly the most difficult in all the Bible. But it is also very important.

Union with Christ! The Scottish pastor and theologian James S. Stewart called union with Christ "the heart of Paul's religion," adding that "this, more than any other conception—more than justification, more than sanctification, more even than reconciliation—is the key which unlocks the secrets of his soul." John Murray went even further, saying, "Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation." Yet, strangely, this is a widely neglected theme even in many otherwise helpful expositions of theology. Arthur W. Pink states the situation fairly:

The subject of spiritual union is the most important, the most profound, and yet the most blessed of any that is set forth in the sacred Scriptures; and yet, sad to say, there is hardly any which is now more generally neglected. The very expression "spiritual union" is unknown in most professing Christian circles, and even where it is employed it is given such a protracted meaning as to take in only a fragment of this precious truth. Probably its very profundity is the reason why it is so largely ignored....

Many preachers avoid such subjects, thinking it better to avoid matters that most of their hearers may be unable or unwilling to understand. But it is not wise to neglect anything God has seen fit to reveal to us,

particularly something as important as this. And, in any case, union with Christ cannot be neglected in any faithful exposition of Romans.

The Theme in Context

Where are we in our exposition of this letter? How does Romans 5:12-21 fit into its context?

At this point it may be worth thinking back to what I said at the beginning of this volume when I introduced the very first words of chapter 5. I rejected the view that Romans 5 introduces an entirely new section of the letter in the sense that in chapters 1-4 Paul has been speaking about justification and that now, in chapters 5-8, he speaks about sanctification. He does speak about sanctification, of course, but not as a radically new theme. On the contrary, as I pointed out (the word *therefore in* Rom. 5:1 is a clue to this), Paul is carrying forward the argument begun earlier, showing that the work of justification, about which he has been speaking, is a sure thing and will inevitably carry through to the believer's full glorification in heaven at the end of life.

Thus far, Paul's arguments have had to do with the nature of our justification:

1. We can be assured of salvation because God has made peace with us through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.
2. We can be assured of salvation because, through that same work of Christ, we have been brought into a new relationship with God in which we continue to stand.
3. We can be assured of salvation because of the sure and certain hope that we shall see God.
4. We can be assured of salvation because of the way we are able to endure sufferings in this life.
5. We can be assured of salvation because God sent Jesus Christ to die for us, not when we were saved people but

when we were enemies.

6. We can be assured of our salvation because, if God has justified us, which is a greater thing and demands more of God than glorification, he will surely do the lesser.

But now we have something new, as I said at the beginning of this study—and yet not new, because the apostle's objective remains the same: to enhance our assurance. We have seen that Romans 5:1-11 argues the certainty and finality of salvation from the nature of justification by faith. Now Paul also argues that when God saved us through the work of Christ, justifying us by faith, justification was not the only thing involved. Justification is immensely important, of course. But in addition to justification, and in conjunction with it, we were also united to Christ in what theologians have come to call "the mystical union." This union with Christ has been revealed to us, although we do not fully understand it.

In my opinion, Paul has anticipated this theme in the verses we have already studied, although I did not point it out at the time and the point is hidden in most of our translations. I am referring to verse 10, which says, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

In the Greek text the last three words are not "through his life," as we have them in the New International Version (or "by his life," as in most others), but literally *"in* his life." Is this important? Yes, in my opinion. For, when we say "through" or "by" his life, the words seem to mean either or both of two things to us: (1) that we are saved through Christ, that is, by his work on the cross, and/or (2) that we are saved through faith in that atonement. But this is not the idea here. The first part of verse 10 does say this, but the second part goes beyond it, making a contrast. The argument is: If God has saved us through the death of Christ (through faith in his atonement), he will certainly save us by our being "in his life." At this point of the letter we may not fully understand what that means. That is why verses 12-21 explain it. But I

am making the point that union with Christ, which Paul develops in verses 12-21, is suggested earlier.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The word 'in' means 'in the sphere of,' or 'in the realm of,' or 'in connection with' his life."

This union with Jesus makes possible the sequence of deliverances from sin, death, and the law, and the resulting spiritual victories that Paul will unfold in the next three chapters of Romans.

Probing the Mystery

Union with Christ is difficult to understand, however, and the treatment of it in Romans 5:12-21 is particularly mind-stretching. So I want to probe this doctrine a bit before we actually get into the verses. There are two important points to keep in mind.

First, the union of the believer with Christ is one of three great unions in Scripture. The first is the union of the persons of the Godhead in the Trinity. Christians, as well as Jews, speak of one God. Yet, on the basis of the revelation of God in Scripture, we who are Christians say we also believe that this one God exists in three persons as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We cannot explain how these three persons of the Godhead are at the same time only one God, but the Bible teaches this and we believe it.

The second mystical union is that of the two natures of Christ in one person. The Lord Jesus Christ is one person. He is not a "multiple personality." Nevertheless, he is also both God and man, possessing two natures. The theological formulation of this truth at the Council of Chalcedon (a.d. 451) said that Jesus is "to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into persons, but one and the same Son." If you understand that completely, you are a

better theologian than I am. But though I do not fully understand it, I believe it since it seems to be what the Bible teaches.

We have a similar situation in the case of the union of believers with Christ. Probably we are never going to be able to understand this union fully either. But it is important. Therefore we should hold to it and try to gain understanding.

The second important point to keep in mind as we study this doctrine is that the union of the believer with Christ is not a concept that was invented by Paul; rather, it was first taught by Jesus and then built upon by the apostle. True, Jesus did not use the term "mystical union." But he taught it in other words and through analogies, which are frequent in Scripture, particularly in the later portions of the New Testament. Let me list a few examples.

1. *The vine and the branches.* The most important passage on this theme is the teaching in John 15. It occurs in one of Jesus' final discourses prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus said, "I am the true vine.... Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:1, 4-5).

The emphasis in this passage is upon the power of Christ nourishing and working itself out through his disciples. Paul touches on this image in Romans 11:17-21, where he speaks of Jewish "branches" being broken off an olive tree so that Gentile "branches" might for a time be grafted in. He is thinking along similar lines in Galatians when he speaks of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23).

2. *The Lord's Supper.* On the same evening that Jesus spoke about himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches, he gave instructions for observing the Lord's Supper in which he said, "This is my body" and "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26, 28).

The sacrament clearly symbolizes our participation in the life of Christ. In the same way, Jesus discoursed on the bread of life ("I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" [John 6:35]) and challenged the woman of Samaria ("Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to everlasting life" [John 4:13-14]).

The emphasis in this image is on empowering (as in the analogy of the vine) and permanence. By faith, Jesus becomes a permanent part of us, just as surely as what we eat.

3. *A foundation and the structure built upon it.* Jesus initiated this image when he spoke of himself as a solid foundation for building a successful life: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock" (Matt. 7:24-25).

Paul made ample use of this image. He told the Corinthians, "You are... God's building.... For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:9b, 11). He told the Ephesians, "... you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:19-20). In the next verse the building becomes a temple: "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (v. 21). Notice the words "in him." It is only because we are "in Christ" that this is possible.

This image also shows that being joined to Christ means that we are at the same time joined to one another. We are part of the church.

4. *The head and members of the body.* This was one of Paul's favorite ways of speaking. "And God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph. 1:22-23). "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.... Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:1112, 14-16).

In these verses (and others like them) the emphasis is upon two things: (1) growth and (2) the proper functioning of the church under Christ's sure direction. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses this image to show that each Christian is needed if the church is to function properly (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27).

5. *Marriage.* By far the greatest of all illustrations of the union of the believer with Christ and of Christ with the believer is marriage, in which a man and a woman are joined to form one flesh and one family. This image is in the Old Testament—Hosea, for example. There God compares himself to the faithful husband who is deserted by Israel, the unfaithful wife (Hosea 1-3). Jesus picked up on this theme when speaking of a marriage supper to which all who have faith are invited (Matt. 22:1-14). However, it is chiefly Paul who develops the theme in what is probably the best-known passage from Ephesians, mixing it with the image of the church as Christ's body.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which

he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.... This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:22-28, 32

The emphasis in this image is upon a love-bonding. This is indeed the one true "marriage made in heaven." It is a marriage not only for this life but for eternity.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

In the studies that follow we are going to be looking at the doctrine of our union with Christ in detail, comparing it initially with our corresponding but contrasting union with Adam. But I close here by trying to put our union with Christ in its widest possible setting, remembering that it is included at this point of the letter to assure us of our security. This is what we find as we look both backward and forward at this union.

Here I quote from the best statement of these themes I know: a chapter on "Union with Christ" in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray:

1. *Election.* "The fountain of salvation itself in the eternal election of the Father is 'in Christ.' Paul says: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1:3, 4). The father elected from all eternity, but he elected in Christ. We are not able to

understand all that is involved, but the fact is plain enough that there was no election of the Father in eternity apart from Christ. And that means that those who will be saved were not even contemplated by the Father in the ultimate counsel of his predestinating love apart from union with Christ—they were *chosen* in Christ. As far back as we can go in tracing salvation to its fountain we find 'union with Christ'; it is not something tacked on; it is there from the outset."

2. *Redemption.* "It is also because the people of God were in Christ when he gave his life a ransom and redeemed them by his blood that salvation has been secured for them; they are represented as united to Christ in his death, resurrection, and exaltation to heaven (Rom. 6:2-11; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 3:3, 4).... Hence we may never think of the work of redemption wrought once for all by Christ apart from the union with his people which was effected in the election of the Father before the foundation of the world.... This is but another way of saying that the church is the body of Christ and 'Christ loved the church and gave himself for it' (Eph. 5:25)."

3. *Regeneration.* "It is in Christ that the people of God are created anew. 'We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works' (Eph. 2:10).... It should not surprise us that the beginning of salvation in actual possession should be in union with Christ because we have found already that it is in Christ that salvation had its origin in the eternal election of the Father and that it is in Christ salvation was once for all secured by Jesus' ransom blood. We could not think of such union with Christ as suspended when the people of God become the actual partakers of redemption—they are created anew in Christ."

4. *Glorification.* "Finally, it is in Christ that the people of God will be resurrected and glorified. It is in Christ that they will be made alive when the last trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:22)."

This great scope of salvation from the electing counsels of God in eternity past to the glorification of the sons of God in eternity future is based on the union of the believer with Christ, and it is for this that the doctrine is so important for us. Assurance of salvation! Security in Christ! This is what we are dealing with in this doctrine, as also in the great middle chapters of Romans. While there are many things meant to encourage us in that security, the greatest of all is that we are "in Christ."

The question you must ask yourself is: "Am I really in him? Am I a Christian?"

How can you know? You cannot look into eternity past to pry into God's hidden counsels. You cannot look into eternity future to see yourself as one who has been glorified. All you have is the present. But if you probe the present, you can know. Do you remember the marriage illustration?
Ask yourself: "Am I married to Jesus?" You are—if you have taken the vow, promising to "take Jesus to be your loving and faithful Savior, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for this life and for eternity," and if you are living for him. God has pronounced the marriage. And what God has joined together no one will ever put asunder.

Chapter 67.
Christ and Adam

Romans 5:12-14

We are studying a difficult, yet extremely important section of Romans, and we have begun by an overview of the doctrine of the mystical union of the Christian with Jesus Christ. This important New Testament theme is widely neglected, no doubt because it is so difficult. But without this doctrine we cannot understand Romans 5:12-21, and without

understanding those verses the truths of this second major section of the letter (chs. 4-8) will be beyond us.

It works the other way, too. We must understand the believer's union with Christ to understand verses 12-21. But, in a parallel way, in order to understand how we are "in Christ" and what that means, we need to see how we were "in Adam," which is where the passage starts. Adam is the "man" mentioned in verse 12: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...." The passage starts with Adam and builds from him, showing, on the one hand, how the union of the race in Adam and the union of believers in Christ are similar and how, on the other hand, they are also quite different, the results of the first being evil and the results of the second being good.

Since the verses also deal with justification, to understand them is to move further in our understanding of this theme. Paul has been teaching that in the work of justification, righteousness has been imputed to us. But people are reluctant to accept that truth. Therefore, to help them understand and believe in the principle of imputed righteousness, Paul shows that we have already been treated on the basis of this same principle "in Adam."

The Flow of the Passage

We start with verse 12. It teaches that sin, followed by death, came into the world by Adam. But you will notice that at the end of verse 12 there is a dash, indicating that the thought breaks off at this point and that Paul inserts what we would call a parenthesis. It is even a bit more complicated than that, however. Verses 13 and 14 are a parenthesis. They explain what Paul meant when he said, at the end of verse 12, "because all sinned." But at the end of verse 14, the apostle throws in another parenthesis to elaborate the parallel between Adam and Christ, which he suggested in verse 14. This parenthesis, which is actually a parenthesis within a parenthesis, fills out verses 15-17. So it is not until verse 18 that we get the continuation of the thought begun in verse 12.

I point this out to show what is coming and to note the full parallelism between Christ and
Adam. According to these verses, believers are now "in Christ," just as they once were "in Adam." That is the similarity. But there is also a contrast, since in Adam the race has experienced sin, leading to condemnation and death, while in Christ believers have experienced righteousness, leading to justification and eternal life. The two sequences are exactly parallel. Putting verses 12 and 18 together, we get something like this:

On the one hand, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—that is, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men....

So also, on the other hand, the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.

This teaches that there were two great acts in history: the act of Adam, which brought condemnation and death, and the act of Jesus, which brought justification and life. The results are "brought" to us by virtue of our union with Adam, on the one hand, and with Jesus Christ, on the other.

Sin and Death Through Adam

Verse 12 assumes two great truths: (1) the universality of sin, and (2) the universality of death.
Paul can do so, because there is hardly anybody who would be foolish enough to challenge them. The most thoroughly secular person will not claim to be perfect. "After all, I am no saint," he might say, thus acknowledging Paul's claim that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). Again, the universality of death is a given. "There is nothing certain in life but death and taxes," we say, using an absolute certainty to illustrate the nature of a lesser one.

But that raises some very big questions: How can we explain this situation? Why is sin universal? And why is death the universal experience of all? Just on the basis of the law of averages, shouldn't we expect that somewhere at some time there would or will have been a sinless person? And shouldn't we find that somewhere at some time there is a person who will not die?

In answering these questions we come to a parting of the ways between secular and Christian thought. The secular mind says two things: (1) there is no connection between sin and death at all, they are two utterly unrelated issues; and (2) each may be explained naturally.

As far as sin is concerned, the secular view assumes that sin is only an imperfection, soon to be overcome. This view of sin fits the prevailing evolutionary framework of our time, according to which all things are gradually evolving from less complex and less perfect forms to forms that are more complex and more perfect. The secular-minded person argues that sin means only that we are not yet where we hope to be and eventually will be.

There are two things wrong with this.

First, if sin is only an imperfection, then it is not really correct to call it sin, or even to look down on it as something less desirable than the next inevitable stage of the evolutionary process. "Sin" is not bad at all, which eliminates the possibility of any meaningful talk about virtue. Nobody can be said to be better or worse than someone else. No action can ever really be inherently wrong.

The second problem is this: If sin is only an imperfection to be eliminated in time as a result of the inevitable upward movement of the race, why has so much evil been around for so long? If sin is only a minor imperfection, why hasn't that imperfection been eliminated long before this? I can go further with such questions. Looking at the historical record left by human beings honestly, is it even possible to say that there has been such a thing as progress? Are we really better than our predecessors? Are we more virtuous than the Greeks? Are we

more noble even than the barbarians? It is hard to say so. But if this is the case, doesn't this fact alone suggest that sin is a much greater problem than the secularist's framework allows?

The other inescapable reality is death. The secularist explains this as something inherent in nature itself. That is, it does not have anything to do with evolution—like sin, which *will* be overcome. It is just natural and inescapable for living things. All living things die. This point is better for the secular argument than the earlier one, since observation confirms that living things do indeed die. We can speak of a process in which organisms are born, grow, decline, and perish. The problem is that none of us really believes that this is right. We sense that we were meant to be immortal. We should not die. Hence arise those images of life beyond death—Mount Olympus, Valhalla, Hades, Sheol, the Underworld, Nirvana, Paradise, Heaven—found in all the world's civilizations and religions.

The Christian answer to the problem of the universality of sin and death is that death is not natural but that it is the punishment of God for sin. It says, moreover, that sin entered the world through the one act of Adam, who was the first man, and that—from Adam—sin and its consequence, death, passed to his descendants.

Four Views within Christianity

The Christian view is far more comprehensive than that brief statement, however. But, in order to develop it fully, I need to acknowledge that there are different views of Romans 5:12 in Christian thought. They arise out of an important question: Assuming that sin and death passed to the race from Adam, how exactly did that happen? And why should it have happened? Why should something that Adam did affect anyone?

1. *Pelagianism.* The first view is called by the name of Pelagius, the opponent of Saint Augustine, but it is not limited to him. Many contemporary liberal commentators on Romans also hold to it. This view teaches that each human being sins in his or her own person, entirely apart from any relationship to Adam, and that the person's

death, which follows, is a consequence of that sin only. There are several reasons why this view must be rejected, even apart from the fact that Pelagianism is wrong generally.

First, it is not observably true. Not all who die, die for their own sin. For example, babies die though they have not sinned themselves.

Second, it contradicts the explanation of the phrase "because all sinned," which Paul himself gives in verses 13 and 14. Those verses, as I have already indicated, are a parenthesis in which Paul breaks off his opening statement in order to explain what he is saying. He says that death reigned "even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam...." That is, they did not sin as Adam did. But this would be untrue if, as Pelagianism holds, every individual dies because of his or her own actual transgression, since that is exactly how Adam himself sinned and was judged.

Third, this interpretation of the universality of sin is inconsistent with the overall flow of the passage. The point of the argument is that we are declared righteous in Christ just as we have been declared sinful in Adam. But we are not declared righteous in Christ because of any righteousness of our own. Rather, it is on the basis of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. If the parallel is to hold, we must also be declared sinful on the basis of Adam's sin and not merely on the fact that we sin personally.

Fourth, the Pelagian view is inconsistent with the tense of the verb *sinned.* It is an aorist. So it cannot mean that all people *do* sin or are *accustomed to sin* (that is, are sinners), but rather that they *have sinned* at a particular past moment. In the context of the passage this can only mean that they have sinned "in Adam."

2. *The view of John Calvin.* The second interpretation of the phrase "because all sinned" is attached to the name of John Calvin, though it seems to be inconsistent with what Calvin himself taught elsewhere. It seems to have been an uncharacteristic slip of interpretation on his part. Calvin took "sin" in Romans 5:12 to

mean "corruption" and the verse to teach that sin passed upon all because all are corrupted. All *are* corrupted by sin, of course. Each would also be condemned for his or her own sin apart from Adam, were not the passage we are studying also true. But true as those points may be in themselves, Paul is nevertheless just not teaching this in Romans.

As in the case of the Pelagian interpretation, the "corruption" view is inconsistent with verses 13 and 14, and with the passage as a whole.

3. *Augustinianism.* The third view was proposed by the great Saint Augustine, but it has been held by many theologians in the Middle Ages and even into modern times. This view is also called the realistic or "seminal" view. It holds that the human race sinned in Adam because in a literal physical sense all future generations were in Adam at the time. So, when he acted the whole race acted, and when he was judged the whole race was judged literally in him.

Most people today would be inclined to discount this as a strange though uniquely medieval idea since, as we see things, the fact that we were in Adam "in embryo," as it were, cannot mean that we all actually sinned in him since we were not conscious entities capable of sinning at the time. But we should probably not dismiss this so quickly. This is because, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, that very point is made in Hebrews 7:9-10, in the case of Levi, Melchizedek, and Abraham: "One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through
Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor." The point of the author is that the descendants of Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek because they were in the loins of Abraham, their forefather, when he paid tithes. But, if that is so, then it must also be true to say that the entire human race was in Adam and therefore sinned when he did. Because of Hebrews 7, the Augustinian or realistic view can never be dismissed too lightly, though, in my opinion, it still does not capture the full meaning of the passage.

4. *Federalism.* The fourth view, which is that of the best interpreters of virtually all Christian traditions—Calvinists, Arminians, Lutherans, even Rationalists—is that God appointed Adam the head or representative of the race, so that he would stand for them and they would be accounted either just or sinful on the basis of his obedience to or disobedience of God's command. This view is called federalism because of the analogy to the way an ambassador might act on behalf of his country. When he signs a document or takes an action, he does so for each of the country's citizens, and they are therefore bound by what he does.

In this view, the point is not that all people sin, though they do, but rather that Adam stood for them so that, when he sinned, not only was Adam judged but they were judged, too. It is because Adam sinned that death passed upon all. Here is how Lloyd-Jones puts it: "Adam's sin is imputed to us in exactly the same way that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. We inherit, of course, a sinful nature from Adam.... But that is not what condemns us. What condemns us, and makes us subject to death, is the fact that we have all sinned in Adam, and that we are all held guilty of sin.... It is our union with Adam that accounts for all our trouble. It is our corresponding union with Christ that accounts for our salvation."

Proof of the Christian View

There are many reasons why federalism is the right interpretation of this passage. Charles Hodge gives nine reasons. But we do not need these or any other additional reasons. We need only the two that Paul himself gives in these verses: (1) the fact that death was in the world before the giving of the law of Moses, and (2) the fact that all die, including innocents. If sin is the transgression of law and people who did not have the law were punished, what other explanation of the universality of death can there be, except that we were all judged in Adam?

Or, to make it even more pointed, why do infants die unless they, along with the rest of the race, have been judged for Adam's sin? Or for that

matter, why do they even suffer? Why do newborns get cancer or have colic?

As far as I can see, there are only two possible answers other than the Christian one, and each is clearly inadequate. The first is the doctrine of an eternity of evil: that sin, death, and evil have simply always existed. The problem with this, as I pointed out in discussing the view of sin as mere imperfection, is that the moral dimensions then vanish and there is no reason why sin should be called sin at all or why evil should be called evil. Besides, although it is possible to understand sin as a corruption of the good—that is, as something that came along to defile God's originally good creation—it is hardly possible to see good as a development out of something that is evil. Satan can be a fallen angel. But no fallen angel can become God.

The other explanation of the universality of suffering and death is reincarnation, the argument being that infants (the most striking example) suffer for the sins done in a previous life. This explains the problem for this life, of course. But it does not solve the real problem, since it only pushes it into a future life and into a life beyond that and so on. At some point the big questions inevitably reemerge.

The only really valid explanation is the one Paul gives, namely, that Adam had been appointed by God to be the representative of the race so that if *he* stood, we too would stand, and if *he* fell, we would fall with him. Adam did fall, as we know. So death passed upon everyone.

"But isn't that terribly unfair?" someone protests. "Isn't it cruel for God to act in this fashion?"

We are going to be studying this at greater length as we go on, but let me state here that far from being unfair or cruel, the federal way of dealing with us was actually the fairest and kindest of all the ways God could have operated. Besides, it was the only way it would later be possible for God to save us once we had sinned. In other words, federalism is actually a proof of God's grace, which is the point the passage comes to (vv. 15 ff.).

It was gracious to Adam first of all. Why? Because it was a deterrent to his sin. God must have explained to Adam that he was to represent his posterity. That might have restrained him from sinning. A father who might be tempted to steal his employer's funds (and would if only he himself were involved), might well decide not to do it if he knew that his crime would hurt his children if he should get caught. If something as limited as that can be a restraining influence, how much more would Adam's knowledge that what he would do would affect untold billions of his descendants?

This way of operating is also an example of God's grace to us, because to be tried in Adam was the best of all ways to stand trial. The great Charles Simeon of Cambridge wrote more than a century ago that if each human being were asked whether he would prefer to be judged in Adam or in himself, every thinking person would answer "in Adam." After all, Adam faced only one temptation and that a mere trifle. He was not to eat of one tree. Besides, he was as yet unfallen. He did not have a sinful nature. He was possessed of his full faculties (which were undoubtedly superior to our own). He lived in a perfect environment and had a perfect companion. For our part, we are sinful, weak, and ignorant, and we live in a world filled with all kinds of temptations. Was it not merciful of God to judge us in Adam? Was God not gracious in that choice?

And there is this great fact as well: If God had chosen to judge us as each of us think we would like to be judged, that is, in and for ourselves with no relationship to any other person, then we would all inevitably perish. For our only hope of salvation is that we may also be judged in Christ, he being our representative, just as we have been judged in Adam. If we were like the angels who are entities in themselves, who do not exist in families and who have no relationship to one another, then there would be no hope for us, just as there is no hope for them. But because we have been judged in Adam, we may also be judged in Christ and be acquitted.

That is what happens for those who are called by God and joined to Jesus Christ through the channel of saving faith. We do not deserve it,

but this is the way grace acts. It is grace from the beginning to the end.

Chapter 68.
The Reign of Death

Romans 5:14

In Romans 5:14 there is a phrase that we have not yet adequately studied but to which we return now: "death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses." It is important to do so for several reasons. First, it is repeated more than once. We find it in verse 14, which we are studying here, but it also appears in verse 17 ("death reigned through that one man"), and a variation of the thought appears in verse 21 ("sin reigned in death"). An idea stated (or implied) three times in just ten verses must obviously be important for our understanding of the passage.

Again, as we have seen in our study of the parallel between our natural, physical union with Adam and our supernatural, spiritual union with Jesus Christ, the fact that death reigns over all persons proves that God has judged everyone in Adam. In other words, the reign of death proves the principles of representation and imputation, both of which are indispensable to Paul's argument. And these principles are indispensable for salvation, since it is only because God determined to treat the entire race representationally—either in Adam or in Christ—that Jesus could die in our place and be our Savior.

Finally, the phrase "death [or sin] reigned" has its counterpart in the words "so also grace might reign through righteousness" in verse 21. Since we want to understand the latter, we must first understand the former.

From Adam to Moses

The first thing to notice about the reign of death is that for the sake of Paul's argument it is linked to a specific time period: "from the time of

Adam to the time of Moses." It is a fact (which we are going to treat explicitly later) that death also reigns in our own day and will continue to reign to the end of human history. But Paul specifies the time period from Adam to Moses because he means something different merely than that all persons die.

Why does Paul cite this specific time period? The answer has to do with what we were exploring in the last study, namely, that death passed upon the race as a result of God's judgment upon all for the sin of Adam.

When we were looking at this point earlier, I focused on the death of infants, who have not committed any conscious sin, because the point is easier to grasp in that fashion. The only adequate explanation for the death of infants is that they, along with the rest of us, have been judged guilty for what Adam did. Paul's argument does not particularly specify infants, however, though they are included in what he says. Rather, he is focusing on all persons, and his argument is that in the time between Adam and Moses all persons died, even though there was no specific law for them to have broken. They were sinners, of course. The judgments of the great flood of Noah's time and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day prove it. But the race as a whole was judged by universal death, not for the specific sins of the individuals involved, but for Adam's transgression.

The critical idea here is "imputation" or, as Paul expresses it in verse 13, the fact that sin was "not taken into account." He means that, although all were sinners, God did not take their own personal sin into account when he punished them. But since they all nevertheless died, their death must have been for Adam's disobedience and not for their own sinfulness.

This is the meaning of the phrase "those who did not sin by breaking a command, *as did Adam."*
People sinned during this period, but it was not by breaking a specific command of God, as Adam did, since there was no specific command for them to break. Adam sinned by breaking a command: he disobeyed

God's explicit warning not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:6).

This is so important that I want to make the point once more, this time by quoting William Barclay. The sad thing is that Barclay does not believe this teaching himself. He understands it, but he thinks that it is only a Jewish argument, which he is free to reject. Nevertheless, Barclay's is the most succinct statement of the argument I have found anywhere:

1. Adam sinned because he broke a direct commandment of God—the commandment not to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree—and because Adam sinned, Adam, who was meant to be immortal, died.

2. The law did not come until the time of Moses; now, if there is no law, there can be no breach of the law; that is to say, if there is no law and no commandment, there can be no sin. Therefore, the men who lived between Adam and Moses did in fact sin, but it was not reckoned against them because there was as yet no law, and they could not be condemned for breaking a law which did not exist.

3. But, in spite of the fact that sin could not be reckoned to them, they still died. Death reigned over them although they could not be accused of breaking a nonexistent law.

4. Why, then, did they die? They died because they had sinned in Adam. It was their involvement in the sin of Adam that caused their deaths, although there was no law for them to break. That, in fact, is Paul's proof that all men did sin in Adam.

In my judgment, the strongest passage in the entire Bible for teaching this is Genesis 5, a chapter that contains the genealogy, not of the ungodly descendants of Adam, who were filling the earth at this time (their genealogy is in chapter 4), but of the godly line of Adam,

containing the names of people like Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah. What is powerful about it is the repeated refrain:

"and then he died."

The sentences need to be read together for their intended effect: "Altogether, Adam lived 930 years, *and then he died*.... Altogether, Seth lived 921 years, *and then he died*.... Altogether, Enosh lived 905 years, *and then he died*.... Altogether, Kenan lived 910 years, *and then he died*.... Altogether, Mahalalel lived 895 years, *and then he died*.... Altogether, Jared lived 962 years, *and then he died*.... Altogether, Methuselah lived 969 years, *and then he died*....
Altogether, Lamech lived 777 years, *and then he died*" (vv. 4, 7, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31, emphasis added). These were long life spans, from 365 (in the case of Enoch, who did not die but was translated) to 969 years (in the case of Methuselah, who lived longer than any other man), but each was cut off by death. Death reigned during this period, just as it has reigned over every other period of human history.

All Must Die

We must apply this now in a way that will enable us to benefit from it. This is because, even though Paul is developing an argument for the imputation both of sin and righteousness, he is not concerned merely with his argument but also with our current great dilemma—all have sinned and must die—and with the solution for it.

Do you know that you must die?

Years ago, when young girls used to learn to read and write by making samplers, the rhymes they would work out in needlepoint often came from the *New England Primer,* which taught Bible truths through couplets based on the English alphabet. Under "A" the child would write:

> In Adam's fall we sinned all.

Under "X," toward the end of the exercise, she would write:

> Xerxes the Great did die, And so must you and I.

That is exacdy what Romans 5 is all about: (1) "A" is for Adam ("sin entered the world through one man"); (2) "X" is for Xerxes ("death came to all men").

Nothing is as certain as death and taxes, we say. Yet we go to great lengths to avoid this inescapable reality.

Franz Borkenau is an historian who believes that cultures can be analyzed in terms of their attitudes toward death. He says that there are three basic attitudes. In ancient Greece he finds a *death-accepting* attitude. In our modern, post-Christian era he finds a *death-denying* attitude. In the Judeo-Christian system he finds a *death-defying* attitude.

1. *A death-accepting culture.* The chief example of the death-accepting attitude of ancient Greek culture is the death of Socrates, one of the best-known deaths of all time. Socrates had been sentenced to death by the rulers of Athens for corrupting the city's youth by his "atheism," which meant that he did not accept the literal existence of the Greek gods. He was to die by drinking hemlock. The moment came. His students were gathered around him. They were weeping. But Socrates did not weep. Instead of bemoaning his fate or shrinking from death, Socrates used the occasion to reason with his sorrowing students about immortality, a discourse that Plato recorded in the "Phaedo." Socrates argued that the soul is immortal and that death is the only way the individual can escape the curse of bodily existence.

The problem, of course, is that it is difficult to die serenely with just a philosophic hope. Socrates may have done it, though we do not know for sure what he was actually experiencing. But few others have. Even Plato confessed that when his mentor drank the poison he, along with the others, burst into tears at losing such a just and wise companion.

2. *A death-denying culture.* The second classification of cultures includes our own. Its attitude is death-denying, which Borkenau finds the most inadequate of all. Why does our culture deny death's inescapable reality? It is all about us, confronting us constantly. Why do we go to such lengths to avoid even speaking about death?

Some years ago the Forest Lawn Foundation, a large West Coast funeral institution, commissioned an American Baptist seminary professor by the name of Richard W. Doss to investigate this question and write a book on a proper understanding of death. Doss suggested several reasons why our society is death-denying. The first is *psychological.* Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, spoke of death as an unconscious fear of man. Therefore, the more one is faced with death, as we are through the newspapers and television, the more one denies it personally. We see reminders of death every day. So we deny death vigorously.

The second reason for our denial of death is *cultural.* American society emphasizes youthfulness, vitality, and productivity. The worth of individuals is measured by what they contribute. Wholeness is measured by one's ability to think and act young. In America death is not the last enemy to be defeated at the last trump, as the Bible describes it, but an enemy to be defeated now—through gyms, health spas, facelifts, diets, health foods, and a variety of other bodyenhancing pastimes and procedures.

This cultural attitude is best expressed by one modern advertising slogan for face cream: "I don't intend to grow old gracefully. I intend to fight it every step of the way."

However, in Doss's judgment the chief reason for America's having become a death-denying culture is *religious.* The nation has lost its religious consciousness:

Religion has been a major force in shaping the ideas and lifestyle of the American people. Our forefathers came to this country with a clearly defined view of man and the world. From the Puritan settlement of New England to nineteenth-century life on the western frontier, a theological framework supported and interpreted man's place in society and his relationship with nature and God. Man believed and felt that God had a purpose for life, and more, that every man could know and understand God's plan. Death was one element within this religious framework and thus could be dealt with openly and treated as a natural part of life.

Burial of the dead was carried out with religious rites which gave expression to this view of God's purposes for man.

[But] the twentieth century has seen a virtual abolition of the traditional Christian framework with no new proposal to take its place. Secularization has separated modern man from older understandings of man and society, and in so doing has separated death from the means by which it has been isolated and denuded. With no meaningful framework for understanding death, our culture has adopted a style of denial and avoidance.

But death cannot be avoided. That is the reality. Death reigns, the very point Paul is making. We may treat death as a fiction. But suddenly death turns our corner, walks down our street, and forces its form across our threshold or enters the home of our neighbor—and we tremble before it.

Death Defeated

3. *A death-defying culture.* The third class of culture that Franz Borkenau lists is death-defying, which he discovers in Judaism and Christianity. The Old Testament Jew looked forward to an afterlife, like Job, who declared:

> I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
> And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;
> I myself will see him with my own eyes—I and not another....
>
> Job 19:25-27

Paul also looked forward. In fact, Paul is the chief example of a death-defying attitude. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55: "'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' [cf. Isa. 25:8]

> 'Where, O death, is your victory?
> Where, O death, is your sting? [cf. Hos. 13:14]'"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

How did the apostle arrive at this answer? How did he and Job sustain their defiance of death?

The answer is: through Jesus Christ! It is the solution Job anticipated ("I know that my Redeemer lives"), and Paul, with his later and greater understanding, proclaimed it boldly.

Here is the bottom line:

1. *Christianity has the only explanation for the universal reign of death, and*

2. *Christianity has the only solution for it.*

Let me share some words written by Horatius Bonar, one of the great Scottish divines of about a century ago and a father of the Scottish Free Church. They are from his volume on Genesis, where he is writing about Adam but thinking also of our text from Romans:

The first Adam dies, and we die in him; but the second Adam dies, and we live in him! The first Adam's grave proclaims only death; the second Adam's grave announces life—"I am the resurrection and the life." We look into the grave of the one, and we see only darkness, corruption and death; we look into the grave of the other, and we find there only light, incorruption and life. We look into the grave of the one and find that he is still there, his dust still mingling with its fellow dust about it; we look into the grave of the other and find that he is not there. He is risen—risen as our forerunner into the heavenly paradise, the home of the risen and redeemed. We look into the grave of the first Adam and see in him the firstfruits of them that have died, the millions that have gone down to that prisonhouse whose gates he opened; we look into the tomb of the second Adam, and we see in him the firstfruits of that bright multitude, that glorified band, who are to come forth from that cell, triumphing over death and rising to the immortal life; not through the tree which grew in the earthly paradise, but through him whom that tree prefigured

—through him who was dead and is alive, and who liveth for evermore, and who has the keys of hell and death.

How did Jesus accomplish this great transformation? He did it by dying in our place, by taking the punishment for our sins upon himself. He became our representative, just as Adam had been our representative before him. He endured the punishment of our death, and then he rose again so that we might enjoy the reality of eternal life.

In his small volume on Romans, the great Bible teacher Harry Ironside included an epitaph that is inscribed on the tombstone of four children in a graveyard in St. Andrews, Scotland. It presupposes that children who die in infancy are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ. It reads like this:

> Bold infidelity, turn pale and die.
> Beneath this stone four sleeping infants lie:
> Say, are they lost or saved?
> If death's by sin, they sinned, for they are here.
> If heaven's by works, in heaven they can't appear.
> Reason, ah, how depraved!
> Turn to the Bible's sacred page,
> the knot's untied: They died, for
> Adam sinned; They live, for
> Jesus died.

Do you follow that argument? We know the infants sinned because they died. Question: How is that possible? Answer: They sinned in Adam. Second question: Can they have been saved, then? Answer: Not by works certainly, because they had not performed any. Third question: Then, they must have been lost? The epitaph answers: No, they were saved—but it was by the death of Jesus Christ.

Union with Christ is the only way of salvation for anyone.

Chapter 69.

Adam: A Pattern of the One to Come

Romans 5:14

What would you say are the most important events of human history? Would you cite the discovery of fire? The invention of the wheel, whenever that may have been? The introduction of printing? How about Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon? Or the invasion of England by the Normans in the fall of 1066? Or the invention of the atomic bomb?

Listing the great moments of history can go on almost indefinitely, and the items listed can all be quite interesting—at least to specific individuals or races. But important as these events may have been, they pale before the two stupendous events that the apostle Paul cites in Romans 5: the fall of the race in Adam, and the redemption of the race by the Lord Jesus Christ. These are the pivotal points of history, and they overwhelm all other events because of two things: (1) the significance of what Adam and Jesus did, though what they did and the results of what they did were quite different; and (2) the people affected. Paul summarizes the importance of these events in Romans 5:18, saying, "... just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men."

The New International Version captures the force of these actions by the subtitle given to verses 12-21: "Death Through Adam, Life Through Christ."

A "Type" of Jesus

Whenever we link these two events, as I have just done (following Paul's example), we stress the contrast: Adam brought death, Jesus brought life. But we need to see that although the contrast is important —verses 15-17 will develop this at some lengtg—athe ways in which Adam and Christ are *similar* are also important, perhaps even more so. This is because our understanding of salvation depends upon this

similarity, which Paul points to by the phrase: "Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come" (v. 14).

What does this mean? We can understand how Adam might be a pattern of other human beings in his choice to sin against God. We sin, too, of course. But how can he be a pattern of Jesus Christ? How can sinful Adam, a mere man, represent the sinless Son of God?

We begin with the critical term in this passage: "pattern." It is translated "figure" in the King James Version and "type" in the Revised Standard Version. The New English Bible resorts to a verbal paraphrase, saying, "Adam foreshadows the Man who was to come." J. B. Phillips says, "Adam, the first man, corresponds in some degree to the man who was to come."

The Greek word is *typos*. It comes from the verb *typtō,* meaning "strike," which is why we have derived the words *type* and *typing* from it. A piece of type is a steel character made to fit into a printing press and strike a piece of paper, leaving an impression of the letter of the alphabet or the symbol it has been made to represent. Typing is a process by which several characters strike a piece of paper in succession. In the Greek world, *typos* referred to the mark left by an object that for some reason or another hit something else, a wound, for example. When Thomas told the other disciples, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (John 20:25), the word translated "marks" is *typos*. It refers to the wounds left by the nails of Jesus' crucifixion.

Along the way, *typos* took on a wider set of meanings. It came to mean a "figure" or "form" of something, a figure of a god, for instance. It appears that way in Acts 7:43, where it is translated (in a plural form) as "idols."

More commonly, *typos* is translated "example." Thus, in 1 Corinthians 10:6 and 11 we read, "Now these things occurred as examples, to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did" and "These things

happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us...." Similarly, Philippians 3:17 declares, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."

Eventually *typos* came also to mean a person, object, or event that typified or prefigured something greater than itself. This is the way it is used in our text, where we are taught that Adam was "a pattern of," or "prefigured," Jesus Christ.

Adam is not the only "type" of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Bible, of course. Much (if not all) of the Old Testament prefigures Christ. I think here of that wonderful scene in which Jesus appeared to the Emmaus disciples following his resurrection and "opened the Scriptures" to them (Luke 24:32). He began with "Moses and all the Prophets" and "explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (v. 27). That is, he taught them from the whole Bible. I am sure that after this great opening of the Scriptures, neither of these disciples ever looked at the Bible as they had before. From this point on, everything in the Old Testament would in one way or another have been a "type" of Christ.

They would have turned to Genesis, and it would have been an entirely new book for them. They would have read of the "seed of the woman" and known that this was Christ. They would have seen him in the promises to Abraham and recognized him, too, in the moving story of Joseph. As they turned to Exodus, they would have seen Christ in the Passover Lamb.

In Numbers he would be the rock in the wilderness from which the people received the water of life freely (Num. 20:2-11; cf. 1 Cor. 10:4). Manna would have further typified Jesus (cf. John 6:32-33), and he would also have been seen in the cloud that led the Israelites during their desert pilgrimage and overshadowed them for their protection.

Deuteronomy pictures Christ as "the righteous one" and defines that righteousness.

In Joshua he is "the commander of the army of the Lord."

So on throughout the Bible. In Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, he is the "sun of righteousness" risen with healing in his wings.

Four Similarities

What about Adam? Our study of "types" has not yet answered the question of how Adam can be said to represent Jesus Christ. But it has put us on the right track in the sense that we have seen that "types" represent their fulfillments in certain great particulars, though not in all respects. This means, then, that we are not looking for a perfect correspondence between Adam and Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, in the next study we are going to see some important differences. What we are looking for here are the important similarities.

So we ask again: "How can Adam be said rightly to represent Jesus Christ? How can sinful Adam typify the sinless Son of God?" There are four important parallels.

1. *Both Adam and Jesus Christ were appointed by God to be representatives for other men.* We have already seen how God appointed Adam to stand for humanity as our federal head or representative, so that if he stood firm in righteousness, we would stand with him, and if he fell, we too would fall. Jesus was also appointed to be a representative. We find this, for example, in Hebrews 10:5-7:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

> "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
> but a body you prepared for me;
> with burnt offerings and sin offerings you
> were not pleased.
> Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written
> about me in the scroll— I have come to
> do your will, O God.'"

According to this and other texts, Jesus was appointed to be a federal head of the race to accomplish our salvation.

2. *Both Adam and Jesus Christ became heads of particular bodies of people, a race or descendants.* Thus, each is the source of what can be called either the old or the new humanity.

The old humanity is the race as it stands apart from Jesus Christ, lost in its sin and headed for destruction. It is what we see about us in the world. The new humanity is that redeemed people who have been saved by Jesus. In Romans 5, Paul speaks of this as "the many [who] were made sinners" in contrast to "the many [who] will be made righteous" (v. 19). In 1 Corinthians 15 he speaks of it again, saying that "in Adam all die" and "in Christ all will be made alive" (v. 22). And again: "'The first Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit" (v. 45).

Notice the words "first Adam" and "last Adam." Paul did not say, "first" and "second," but rather "first" and "last," because he was thinking of Adam and Christ, not as mere men, but in this representative capacity. It is a way of saying that there are only two humanities (not three or four or more), only two representative heads of these humanities—there will never be a third—and that the entire race is divided into these two humanities by virtue of people's relationships to these representatives.

3. *Both Adam and Jesus Christ had covenants made with them by God.* A covenant is an agreement between two parties, usually confirmed by a symbolic act or oath. We have many examples, particularly in the Old Testament: the covenant with Noah; the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Deuteronomic covenant; the covenant with David; and so on.

The word *covenant* is not used in the Bible specifically of Adam, but there can be little doubt that God established a covenant with him. The pertinent words are in Genesis 2, where God says, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (vv. 16-17). That is a short statement. But in light of Romans 5 and

similar teaching elsewhere, it can surely be expanded to mean: "If you obey me by refusing to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which I have placed in the garden, then you will be established in righteousness and live forever. Moreover, all who descend from you will also be established in righteousness and enjoy the fruit of righteousness, which is eternal life. But if you disobey me and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die. And not only will you die; death will also come to your descendants. You will be their ruin, and they will be condemned for your act." (We explored that idea in a previous study.)

In the same way, a covenant was made by God with Jesus Christ. It would have gone as follows: "If you will become the federal head or representative of a new humanity, taking upon yourself the task of fulfilling my divine law and then dying to make satisfaction for the sins of a people I will give to you, then that people shall be freed from sin's bondage, be given eternal life, and be raised to life to reign with you in heaven throughout eternity."

This is a great covenant, which is why the author of Hebrews contrasts it with the covenant made with Israel (which was similar to the covenant made with Adam), saying, "... the covenant of which he [Jesus] is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises" (Heb. 8:6).

4. *Both Adam and Jesus Christ passed on to others the effects of their disobedience or obedience.* The effect of Adam's disobedience was sin, condemnation, and death. The effect of Jesus' obedience was righteousness, justification, and eternal life.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who has an excellent summary of these important similarities, says, "Adam's sin and its consequences was passed on to us all without exception: Christ's obedience and righteousness is passed on to all who believe in him."

Robert Haldane also makes the point nicely: "The two Adams are the heads of the two covenants. The one the representative of all who are

under the covenant of works, communicating his image unto them; the other the representative of all who are under the covenant of grace, and communicating his image to them. By the one man's disobedience many were made sinners, and by the obedience of the other many shall be made righteous."

A Historical Adam

In the next study we will explore the other side of the comparison between Adam and Christ, namely, the differences between them. But before we do, we need to remind ourselves of what the comparison itself, including both the similarities and the differences, teaches about Adam and the events that surround him in Genesis.

The first point is that Adam was an actual historical character, every bit as real as ourselves.

There has been a tendency in recent times, perhaps since the middle of the last century, to dismiss Adam (as well as many other parts of the Book of Genesis) as mythology. A myth is a story meant to tell a religious truth. It differs from a fable, which is an imaginary story with a moral, like Aesop's fables, in which animals speak. It also differs from a legend, which is an heroic saga involving larger-than-life characters. The tales of King Arthur fit the legend category. On the other hand, a myth is a *religious* story. It does not necessarily have to do with gods and goddesses or heroes or heroines, though it often does. But a myth deals with timeless or religious truths and—this is the important point—it is not meant to be taken literally. This is why so many liberal scholars in particular have viewed the story of Adam as mythology.

Whenever I hear that judgment, I think of a contrasting judgment by the great English literary scholar and Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, who made his reputation writing about mythology. Lewis was dealing with claims that the New Testament is mythology, but his points apply to the Genesis accounts equally well. He wrote:

A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of New Testament texts and of other people's studies of them, whose literary experiences of those texts lacks any standard of comparison

such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is, I should think, very likely to miss the obvious things about them. If he tells me that something in a gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends or romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavor; not how many years he has spent on that gospel.

Lewis then introduced the Gospel of John as an example of biblical material considered to be mythology, concluding, "I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this."

Nor are they like Genesis. If the story of Adam is a myth, then we are going to have to find a new definition for the word! For there *was* an historical Adam; his story *is* to be taken literally.

The real proof of the historicity of Adam is the parallel the aposde Paul draws between the person of Adam and the person of Christ, which we have been studying. Jesus was a specific historical character. He came to earth at a specific past time—in the days of Herod the king, when Caesar Augustus was the ruler of the Roman Empire and Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 1:5; 2:1-2)—and he accomplished a literal redemption for us by his death at the hands of Pontius Pilate. Jesus came into our history to undo the effects of Adam's literal transgression. Therefore, Adam himself (and his deeds) must have been historical.

You do not need an historical atonement to undo a mythological fall or a mythological transgression. All you need is another myth. But if Christ needed to be real to save us, then Adam was real, too. It is because Adam was real that Christ also had to be real to make atonement.

That brings us to the second thing the comparison between Adam and Jesus Christ teaches: that the fall of the human race was also historical. It was a real event. That is important because it involves guilt before God—true guilt, not merely imagined guilt or a feeling of guilt.

I am convinced that the major reason why the liberal scholars want to regard the opening chapters of Genesis as mythology is that they do not

want to face the reality of the fall of the race in Adam or the guilt that flows from it. If there was no fall, then all this business about Adam and Eve and the serpent and the Garden of Eden is meant only to describe our unfortunate but inevitable human condition. It is meant only to say that we live in an imperfect world and must therefore continually struggle against imperfection. Rather than involving guilt, a framework like that actually gives us cause for pride and an imagined heroic stature. We are not to be blamed for anything. We have simply inherited imperfection and are, if anything, to be praised for how well we are struggling against it. In fact, we can be said to be doing better and better all the time.

But it is not that way. We are not doing better and better, nor are we merely struggling against imperfections. We were once right with God in Adam. But we rebelled. Now we are actually falling away from God as rapidly as our depraved powers and the downward-spiraling flow of our culture will take us. Romans 1 describes this decline. If we are to be saved, it must be by another historical act. The Lord Jesus Christ, who entered history precisely for that reason, must perform it.

In Adam or in Christ?

I close with these paragraphs from Donald Grey Barnhouse:

Apart from the story of his fall, it is remarkable how little is written in the Bible concerning Adam. He was created by God; he was commanded to take dominion over creation; he fell; for him the first blood sacrifice was made. He had several children, the first of whom was a murderer; the second, a type of those who believe and follow Christ; and the third, the progenitor of the race and fulfillment of the promises of God. There is also recorded Adam's age at death— an extremely meager biography. But two stupendous facts make Adam one of the most famous names in history. He was the first man, and he was the first sinner. He dissipated his children's heritage, and we have all been in spiritual poverty ever since. But as we peer at him through the shadows of time we do not judge him too harshly, for we know that he did exactly what we would have done in his place.

And, indeed, we can look rather kindly upon Adam, because through him we learn the principle of the one standing for the many. At the cross of Jesus Christ we see that other one also standing for the many. As Adam stood for many and brought death upon all, so our Lord Jesus stood for many and brings life to all who believe. Without question everyone of us is in Adam.

Can you look away to Calvary and know that you are in Christ? Having been defiled by the stream that flows from Adam, you can find cleansing only by plunging into the stream that flows from the Lord Jesus Christ dying for us, as head of the new race.

Chapter 70.
Three Great Contrasts

Romans 5:15-17

The paragraph to which we come now, Romans 5:15-17, is one in which Paul develops the differences between our being in Adam and our being in Christ. But in order to understand it we have to go back to the overall analysis of Romans 5:12-21, which I did earlier. If you remember that analysis, you will recall that in those verses Paul is writing about Christ and Adam and that, at the beginning of the section, he started to develop an important comparison: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man [he means Adam], and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...."

At this point Paul obviously intended to go on with something like what we find in verse 18: "... so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life to all men." But when he got to the point of saying, "and in this way death came to all men, *because all sinned,*" he interrupted his thought, as we have already seen. Apparently he sensed that the majority of his readers (if not all) would be confused by the words "because all sinned." They would not have even the faintest idea what he was really talking about. They would think he

meant only that all people sin, when actually he meant that all have been accounted sinners because of Adam's first transgression. So Paul did the only sensible thing. He broke off what he was saying to explain himself.

Verses 13 and 14 are that explanation. In them he shows that the punishment for sin, which is death, was in the world even before the law was given through Moses. Therefore, since people everywhere died during this period, though they were not technically transgressors of the law, which was not yet given, they must have been condemned, not for their own transgressions (though they were guilty of them), but for the sin of Adam. Paul's point is that we were condemned by reason of our union with Adam, just as we have now been saved by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ. It is an important and great similarity.

Parenthesis within a Parenthesis

Here we might have expected Paul to have resumed the contrast with which he began the section, as I indicated he does do when he gets to verse 18. But he does not do this immediately, and the reason must be that when he got to the end of verse 14 he began to think that a further clarification was needed. He had shown that we are united to Christ, just as we were united to Adam. But he must have said to himself, "I cannot give the impression that the parallel holds true on every level. Although it is true that we are justified in Christ, just as we have been condemned in Adam, that is only part of the story. Actually, the differences are as great as the similarities.
We are condemned in Adam, true. But the salvation that we have because of our union with Christ is far greater and more glorious."

For this reason, Paul interjects here what I have called a parenthesis within a parenthesis or, as you might prefer to say, a further digression. In verses 13 and 14 he has explained how we have "sinned in Adam." In verses 15-17 he digresses further to explain how union with Christ is greater in its nature and effects than our original union with Adam.

I have called this study "Three Great Contrasts," because of the way Paul sets out his contrasts in the three verses we are studying here, verses 15, 16, and 17. But actually the paragraph is filled with contrasts:

trespass *versus* gift
death versus eternal life
condemnation versus justification
one versus many
sin versus righteousness
Adam versus Christ

The comparisons continue in verses 18-21:

disobedience versus obedience
sinners versus those who have been made righteous
law versus grace.

The final idea, the triumph of grace over law and the "reign" of grace, is a climax to which the entire chapter moves. It supports the position with which Romans 5 began: that the one who has been joined to Christ by faith is secure in that relationship.

Natural *Versus* Supernatural

Of these three verses (vv. 15-17), the hardest to understand is the first, because it is least explicit. It says: "But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" In what way is the gift of salvation in Christ *not* like the trespass? In what sense is the gift *much more?*

Let me begin by saying that there is a sense in which this verse is a generic or inclusive statement of the contrasts that follow, so that the remainder of the chapter might be considered exposition. But that aside, it is still right to ask: What is the particular contrast, the unique idea, that verse 15 introduces?

I suggest that the contrast is found in the first key word Paul uses, after having said that "the gift is not like the trespass." It is the word *died.*

The sin of Adam brought death. It brought death to all. By contrast, the gift of God brought life to many.

We must not be misled by Paul's use of the word *many.* To most people today "many" suggests "number." So we immediately begin to weigh the "many" who sinned and therefore fell in Adam with the "many" who are being saved in Christ and ask which is greater. Does this verse teach that the saved will outnumber the lost eventually? (There are expositors who say this.) Does it perhaps teach that eventually all will be saved, that is, universalism? I maintain that it is not teaching either one of these things. Paul has been thinking of the union of the race with Adam and the union of the saved with Christ. He is not thinking quantitatively at all. So when he writes of "the many" who died because of Adam's transgression, he means just that: the many who died in Adam, that is, all persons. And when he writes of "the many" to whom the gift of life overflows, he also means many, for surely "many" are being saved.

But what is the contrast, if it is not between a smaller number and a greater number, or between numbers at all? It is, as I suggested, between *death*, which has come upon all because of Adam, and *life*, which has been given to every believer in Christ.

Death is a natural thing, "natural" in the sense that if we are left to ourselves without any supernatural intervention, death simply comes. God told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, they would die. They ate of it, and they did die. It did not require any special intervention of God to produce the effect. Sin always produces death. Moreover, it produces death equally for all. Because Adam sinned, death passed in a natural and inevitable way upon the human race. To that extent, the secularists are right when they speak of a normal biological sequence in which organisms are born, mature, grow old, and eventually die. This is so natural and so understandable that Oswald Spengler used it to explain the equally natural and equally understandable rise and decline of nations. He even used it to prophesy the decline of the western nations in the title of his monumental history, *The Decline of the West*.

Is death natural? Of course.

Even taxes are not as inescapable as mortality.

"But the gift is not like the trespass." Over against the natural outworking of the sin of our first parent, resulting in the death of all, stands the supernatural working of the gracious God. Left to ourselves, the cause is hopeless. Nothing is more characteristic of the presence of man upon earth than graveyards. But God has not left us to ourselves. He has intervened to save us, apart from anything we can do or could ever have done. It is what Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-7:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

This is what Paul will write about later on in Romans, though more briefly: "For the wages of sin is death [that is natural part], but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord [this part is supernatural]" (Rom. 6:23). Think of what follows from this:

1. Glory goes to God and not man, and 2. Salvation is certain, because the work of God is a lasting thing, unlike our own weak achievements. It is because the work is of God and not man that nothing in creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

One Sin *Versus* Many Sins

Verse 16 carries the contrast between the effects of Adam's sin and the effects of God's work in Christ further, pointing out that "the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification."

As I suggested earlier, this verse is easier to understand than the previous one, which is generic and somewhat understated. It is hard to see the precise contrast in verse 15, but this is not true of verse 16. Here a clear contrast is found between the "one sin" that brought condemnation, that is, the sin of Adam in eating from the forbidden tree, and the "many trespasses," which Adam and all who followed him have committed but which are atoned for by the blood of Christ.

Let me elaborate: If in some way—which we know is impossible, but I put it like this only for the sake of argument—the one sin of Adam in eating of the forbidden tree turned out to be the only sin Adam ever committed, and if no one who came after him in all the long ages of human history (including Eve and Cain and Abel and all the rest of mankind down to and including ourselves and our contemporaries) ever committed another sin in thought, word, or deed, it would still have been necessary for Jesus to die to save us. Since we are condemned for Adam's sin, he having been our federal representative, we would still need a Savior to rescue us from that original sin and God's consequent condemnation. And even if that had been the situation and Jesus had come to save us from the effects of only that one sin, salvation would still have been glorious, and the angels would still rightly have used their time singing: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

But that is *not* the situation! Adam's one sin did bring condemnation to all, from which Christ alone has redeemed us. But Adam's one sin was not the only sin Christ died for. Adam, having become a sinner, sinned many more times before he died. In fact, it would have been as true of him as Scripture later says it is of the entire race that "every inclination

of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). And Adam's many sins were followed by countless billions of sins by countless billions of sinners, all of whom added their own evils, arrogance, brutality, malice, and other vices to the grim moral history of mankind.

What is the essence of human history? From God's point of view, is it not what Paul has already summarized in Romans 1:29-32?

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve those who practice them.

Since Christ died for such a vast accumulation of sins, is it any wonder that Paul marvels in Romans 5 how "judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed *many trespasses* and brought justification" (v. 16, emphasis added).

Death *Versus* the Reign of Life

The third and final great contrast is in verse 17: "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

What does that mean?

The key to understanding this verse is to emphasize the word *abundant* in the phrase "God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness," and the thought that those who have been thus abundantly blessed are enabled to *reign in life* now through Jesus. To put it simply, the work of Christ in dying for us did not merely restore us to the position in which Adam stood before the fall, but rather carries

us beyond that. One commentator says, "Those redeemed by the death of Christ are not merely recovered from the fall, but made to reign through Jesus Christ, to which they had no title in Adam's communion."

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, righdy noting the reappearance of the *word justification* in this section, says,

It is not only that we are forgiven, but over and above being forgiven, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is put to our account, is put upon us.... Unfallen Adam was righteous, but it was his own righteousness as a created being, it was the righteousness of a man. Adam never had the righteousness of Jesus Christ upon him. What he lost was his own righteousness. But you and I are not merely given back a human righteousness, the righteousness that Adam had before he fell—we are given the righteousness of Jesus Christ. "Much more"—abundance, superabundance—give full weight to it! We receive this abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness.

If Adam had remained in a state of righteousness, he could have sung: "In my own righteousness I stand,/Soon to join God's glorious band." But Adam did not stand. He fell, because he was not able by his own strength to confirm himself in righteousness. Similarly, were we to attempt to stand in our own righteousness, assuming that we could attain to it in the first place, we would fall also. But we do not fall. We stand instead, and the reason we stand is that we do not stand in our own righteousness. So we sing:

> Jesus *thy* Blood and righteousness
> My beauty are, my glorious dress; 'Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head.

Moreover, it is not only that we will stand in that final day of divine judgment. We stand now, which is what the phrase "reigning in life" refers to. It means that by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion and empowering of the Holy Spirit, we are victorious *now.* In this way, the gift of God in Christ far surpasses the effects of Adam's and all other transgressions.

Through Jesus Christ

I close by noting some words that Paul has kept repeating in these verses and that also occur later. They are "through the one man," that is, "through Jesus Christ." They occur in verse 17, but we have already encountered a similar phrase in verse 15: "by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ." And the same idea is found later, in verses 19 and 21: "through the obedience of the one man" and "through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The apostle never leaves this idea out because, as we have been seeing, it is the one glorious and absolutely essential truth in this passage. We were in Adam once, and we fell in him. His sin brought death on the human race. What then? Good news! We can escape the effects of Adam's fall, Paul tells us. More than that, we can rise above the position in which Adam first stood. We can stand in a divine righteousness, which is perfect and which can never be taken away from us.

It enables us to reign in life, triumphing over sin, as Adam, in his own human (though once perfect) righteousness, could not. Therefore we can sing:

> On Christ the solid rock I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.

Are you "in Jesus"? Adam was not "in Jesus," and he fell, even from his high pinnacle of human perfection. If he who was once humanly perfect fell, what chance do *you* have to stand, you who are corrupted by many sins and wholly disposed to unrighteousness?

Your only hope is to believe on Jesus and be joined to him. It is to stand in him, as you originally stood (but also fell) in Adam.

Chapter 71.
Grace

Romans 5:15-17

In the preceding five studies, we have been looking at Romans 5:12-21 with attention to its outline and great themes, trying to follow Paul's thought as he compares our natural union with Adam, on the one hand, with our spiritual union with Christ, on the other. It is a comparison that has involved both similarities and differences. Now we must look at just one word: *grace.* It is a wonderful, magnificent word. "Grace" occurs five times in this passage, three times in verses 1517, which we are particularly studying here, and twice more in verses 20 and 21. In these verses Paul says that grace is of God and that it comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is free, triumphant, and overflowing.

What is grace? It is God's favor toward the undeserving. Grace lies behind the plan of salvation, but it is also what brings that salvation to us individually and effectively, which is why the great Baptist preacher of the last century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, called it both the "fountain" and
"stream" of salvation. Someone has made grace into an acrostic, calling it: "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." Another has said, "Grace is favor shown to people who do not deserve any favor at all, who, indeed, deserve the exact opposite."

Amazing Grace!

Whenever I come to a word like "grace" and want to capture something of its special meaning for a sermon, I frequently turn to a hymnbook to see how it has been described in poetry by earlier Christians. When I do this for grace, I find that I am almost overpowered by the words and hymns available. In the hymnbook I commonly use there is a table of contents that is organized theologically, and when I turn to it I find that "grace" appears not only in one section or category but in many. It appears under the doctrine of God in two listings: "His [that is, God's]
Love and Grace" and "The Covenant of Grace." Under "Jesus" I find "His Love and Grace."
Later on there are listings for "Salvation and Grace" and "God's Refreshing Grace."

In the back of this hymnbook there are listings for "converting grace," "efficacious grace," "magnified grace," "refreshing grace," "regenerating grace," "sanctifying grace," "saving grace," and "sovereign grace."

The hymns themselves swell this powerful verbal litany, using phrases like "amazing grace," "abounding grace," "matchless grace," "marvelous grace," and "pardoning grace." A number of these are among the great literary treasures of the English language.

There are the classic lines of John Newton:

> Amazing grace—how sweet the sound— That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.

Or these by Philip Doddridge:

> Grace! 'Tis a charming sound,
> Harmonious to the ear;
> Heaven with the echo shall resound, And all the earth shall hear.

My favorite hymn about grace was written by Samuel Davies, a former president of Princeton University:

> Great God of wonders! All thy ways
> Are worthy of thyself—divine;
> And the bright glories of thy grace Among thine other wonders shine;
> Who is a pardoning God like thee? Or who has grace so rich and free?
>
> Pardon from an offended God!
> Pardon for sins of deepest dye!
> Pardon bestowed through Jesus' blood!
> Pardon that brings the rebel nigh!
> Who is a pardoning God like thee? Or who has grace so rich and free?

O may this glorious, matchless love,
This God-like miracle of grace,
Teach mortal tongues, like those above, To raise this song of lofty praise:
Who is a pardoning God like thee? Or who has grace so rich and free?

Theologians speak of "common grace," "saving grace," "irresistible grace," and "persevering grace." "Sovereign grace" is among the most powerful of all theological expressions.

No wonder Spurgeon said of grace: "What an abyss is the grace of God! Who can measure its breadth? Who can fathom its depth? Like all the rest of the divine attributes, it is infinite. God is full of love, for 'God is love.' God is full of goodness; the very name 'God' is short for 'good.' Unbounded goodness and love enter into the very essence of the Godhead. It is because 'his mercy endureth for ever' that men are not destroyed; because 'his compassions fail not' that sinners are brought to him and forgiven."

Boring Grace?

Despite all this, there are today in most of our churches probably only a small percentage of people who really believe in grace, much less appreciate it. They pay lip service to grace; they know we are "saved by grace" apart from our own good works. But there they stop. If they were to tell the truth, most would probably say that they find the topic of "grace" boring.

The great English theologian J. I. Packer has noted this, observing of such people,

Their conception of grace is not so much debased as nonexistent. The thought means nothing to them; it does not touch their experience at all. Talk to them about the church's heating, or last year's accounts, and they are with you at once; but speak to them about the realities to which the word "grace" points, and their attitude is one of deferential blankness.

They do not accuse you of talking nonsense; they do not doubt that your words have meaning; but they feel that, whatever it is you are talking about, it is beyond them, and the longer they have lived without it the surer they are that at their stage of life they do not really need it.

What could possibly have caused such indifference, particularly to such a sublime concept? Packer believes that it reflects a failure to understand, acknowledge, and "feel in one's heart" the four great truths that the biblical doctrine of grace presupposes:

1. *The moral ill-desert of man.* Modern man is complacent about his grim spiritual condition, and he assumes that God is also. "The thought of himself as a creature fallen from God's image, a rebel against God's rule, guilty and unclean in God's sight, fit only for God's condemnation, never enters his head."

2. *The retributive justice of God.* "The idea that retribution might be the moral law of God's world, and an expression of his holy character, seems to modern man quite fantastic."

3. *The spiritual impotence of man.* "To mend our own relationship with God, regaining God's favor after having once lost it, is beyond the power of any of us." Yet few think this in our century.

4. *The sovereign freedom of God.* Most people think God owes them something. But, says Packer rightly, "The God of the Bible does not depend on his human creatures for his wellbeing... nor, now that we have sinned, is he bound to show us favor.... God does not owe it to anyone to stop justice taking its course.... Only when it is seen that what decides each man's destiny is whether or not God resolves to save him from his sins, and that this is a decision which God need not make in any single case, can one begin to grasp the biblical view of grace."

Grace upon Grace

Each of these missed points, so well defined by Packer, has already been spelled out in Romans. Therefore, if we have come to this point

having understood what has been taught earlier, we know what grace is and are prepared to marvel at it, as Paul himself does in this section. In fact, this is what we are going to do in the studies that close out our treatment of Romans 5. They are entitled: "Justification by Grace," "Law and Grace," "Abounding Grace," "God's Motives for Grace," and "The Reign of Grace." Each will help us to explore this marvelous concept further.

But what should we do here? In this first study of grace, I want to set the subject in its broadest context, showing how the grace of God operates. There are five main categories.

1. *Electing grace.* As soon as we see that grace really is apart from any possible merit in its object, we understand that God is utterly sovereign in his choices. Most people probably think of God's saving men and women (if they think of this at all) on the basis of some good in them, either seen or foreseen. That is, most people think that God waits to see the good we are capable of performing and then saves us, if the good is good enough. Or, if we insist with such people, as the Bible teaches, that God has made a decision to save whom he will save in eternity past — before we were created and thus had any opportunity of doing anything—they answer that the decision must have been made on the basis of the good God foresees. Even those who think they believe in grace will sometimes argue this way, supposing that what God foresees is the "faith" that enables him to save us.

But answer this: If men and women really are as corrupt as the Bible describes us as being, what possible "good" in us could God foresee, unless he himself should first decide to put it there? If, as Genesis 6:5 maintains, "every inclination of the thoughts of [our hearts is] only evil all the time," even faith must be created in us sovereignly as an expression of God's grace.

Another way of saying this is to say that grace is eternal; it is before all things.

Still another way is to say that grace is the source or fountainhead of salvation; it is not dependent on anything.

Some years ago, Dr. John H. Gerstner, a former Professor of Church History at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was preaching a series of sermons on Romans and had just gotten around to teaching about election in what had turned out to be the eighth sermon in the series. There was a question period afterward, and one man asked, "Why are you Presbyterians always talking about predestination? Why don't you focus on the atonement?" This was the eighth sermon in the series, remember. Gerstner had actually been talking about the atonement for the previous seven messages. But he overlooked that matter and instead pointed out to the man who had asked the question that there would have been no atonement at all if there were no predestination. "If God had not unconditionally elected you to salvation, can you suppose for one moment that he would have sent his precious Son into the world to redeem you?" Gerstner asked.

We can never pre-distance grace. The grace of God, like God himself, is before all other things. It is from grace that all good comes.

2. *Pursuing grace.* Do you remember what happened to Adam and Eve when they sinned by eating of the forbidden tree? We might have expected that God would have cast them off, abandoning them to hell, since that is what they deserved. But, instead of this, Adam had not moved far from the place of his rebellion when God came to him, calling him by name, and eventually pursuing him into the grove of trees where he and Eve were hiding. There he made great promises of grace, announcing that the Messiah would one day be sent to destroy Satan and restore the guilty pair to Paradise.

It has always been like this. Saul, the self-righteous Pharisee fled God, kicking even against the "goads" of conscience. He fled God by religious activity and zeal, even to the point of hunting out, arresting, and killing Christians. But God pursued Paul. He pursued him to Damascus, stopping him in his furious outward flight. He called to him:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Grace did that, and Paul never forgot the fact.

The God of grace has been called "The Hound of Heaven," who pursues rebellious man down the long corridors of time and circumstance.

We may think at times that we have sought God. But as we grow in grace and increasingly learn the nature of our own sinful hearts, we discover that we have sought him only because he first sought us.

> I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me; It was not I that found, O Savior true. No, I was found of thee.

3. *Pardoning grace.* Samuel Davies marveled at this when he wrote: "Who is a pardoning God like thee? Or who has grace so rich and free?" And no wonder! What he was marveling at was no less than the very core of salvation. We are more accustomed to speak of this core as justification by faith, but that is only a convenient theological shorthand. What we mean when we speak of justification by faith is justification by the grace of God through faith, according to which we are moved from "the status of a condemned criminal awaiting a terrible sentence to that of an heir awaiting a fabulous inheritance." And that is grace! Why was it that God "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all"? (Rom. 8:32), asks J. I. Packer. It is grace alone!

We did not deserve it. We could never deserve it. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5).

4. *Persevering grace.* Reformed Christians refer to the last of the well-known points of

Calvinism as "the perseverance of the saints" and explain rightly that those who have been saved by grace persevere. They note Jesus' saying that "he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matt. 10:22). This is a sound emphasis. The Christian life is not passive on our part. We are

active in it. When Christ calls us we come running, and we keep on running. But notice: We persevere because he perseveres. We endure to the end because the grace of God preserves us. Indeed, it is absurd to suppose that we are able to keep ourselves in grace even for a single moment. If it were up to us, in the final analysis all would be lost.

Do you remember the third verse of John Newton's hymn?

Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.

That is it exactly. Grace has brought us to where we are now, and that same grace, persevering grace, will lead us to glory.

5. *Saving grace.* I have left the category of "saving grace" until now because, although salvation is usually thought of in reference to our being justified or pardoned only, salvation is actually a more embracing concept. It refers to the past: God saved us from sin's penalty in Christ. It concerns the present: God is saving us from sin's power now. It looks to the future: God will save us from sin's very presence when we are given our resurrection bodies and are taken into his holy presence forever.

How? It is by grace, grace only.

Grace in God's People

I have two main conclusions in this study. First, if we have been saved entirely by grace, as we see we have, this very fact should draw us closer to God. Why? Because without him we are lost. We must never trust ourselves.

> Oh, to grace how great a debtor
> Daily I'm constrained to be;
> Let that grace now, like a fetter,
> Bind my wandering heart to thee.
> Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
> Prone to leave the God I love;
> Here's my heart, Oh, take and seal it,

Seal it for thy courts above.

Robert Robinson, 1758

Second, let us revel in grace, abounding in it even as it is abounding. Why? Because, as D.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "It is only when you and I, and others who are members of the Christian Church, are rejoicing in this abounding grace as we ought to be, that we shall begin to attract the people who are outside the church." There are lots of things about Christianity that will always be unattractive to the world: holiness, discipleship, self-sacrifice, and more. There are scores of them. But grace is not one. Grace is attractive, and those who have received grace should be attractive, too.

Later on, Paul is going to speak of grace "abounding." Let it abound! He is going to speak of grace "reigning." Let it reign! Let it reign until all about turn to you and say, "If that is
Christianity, then that is what I want." Do not live like a pauper when God has made you a king.

Chapter 72.
Justification by Grace

Romans 5:18-19

I do not know when or where it happened, but somebody was sitting in his apartment, getting ready to go to bed, when he heard his neighbor drop a shoe on the floor above him. The upstairs neighbor was obviously getting ready for bed, too, and the man below him waited for the thud of the other shoe. Afterward he must have talked about it, and the expression "waiting for the other shoe to drop" became an expressive figure of speech in our language.

Now we come to what we have been waiting for ever since we started to study Romans 5:12-21. Our expectation arose because Paul began this great passage with a contrast: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to

all men, because all sinned...." But just when we were expecting the second half of that thought, he broke it off, and everything we have been studying since has in a sense been a digression, or parenthesis.

In fact, there have been two major digressions, which it might be helpful to review before proceeding.

First, Paul explained the sense in which "all sinned." He did not mean that all have become sinners and have therefore sinned, though we would naturally think this, but rather that each of us was declared a sinner because of Adam's original sin or transgression. It is true that we also sin and should be condemned for that, if there were nothing more to be said. But that is not Paul's meaning. He meant that all have been accounted sinners in Adam, so that those who were going to be saved could be accounted righteous in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since this digression finished at the end of verse 14, we again expected the other shoe to drop. But instead of completing the contrast introduced by verse 12, Paul worked in another long parenthesis to show the differences between our union with Adam, on the one hand, and our union with Jesus Christ, on the other. This second digression started at verse 15 and occupied the next three verses.

It is only when we get to verse 18 that the second shoe finally falls and we get the full impact of the contrast. Paul backs up to give it, restating the first part again, although in slightly different words: "[1] Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, [2] so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." There we have it!

But then, lest we have fallen asleep in the meantime and have somehow missed the point after this long wait, Paul makes it again in verse 19, adding: "[1] For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, [2] so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

What a great list of contrasts is implied here! In a previous study we have already seen "Three

Great Contrasts" in verses 15-17. They were intended to show the ways in which the work of Adam and the work of Christ were dissimilar. The new list of contrasts in verses 18 and 19 shows the fullness of what Paul is teaching and serves as a summary. Those contrasts are:

Adam	*versus*	Christ
The one trespass of Adam	*versus*	the one act of righteousness of Christ
The disobedience of Adam	*versus*	the obedience of Christ
Death	*versus*	life
Condemnation	*versus*	justification

Of these five contrasts, the greatest is the one between condemnation and justification, since this is what the chapter has been dealing with in one way or another all along.

By Faith or By Grace?

In the previous study, I said that we would be dealing with the subject of God's grace through the end of Romans 5, and for that reason I have called this study "Justification by Grace." But I wonder if that sounds right to you. We already know about "justification by faith." It was the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther having said that it is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. But if that is so, why should we speak of justification by *grace? The* answer, of course, is that both statements are parts of the same truth, since the justification that is received by faith alone (*sola fide*) is also by grace alone (*sola gratia*).

A full statement of the doctrine would be: "Justification by the grace of God alone, received through faith alone."

Justification is an act of God as judge by which he declares us to be in a right standing before him so far as his justice is concerned. We are not just in ourselves, of course. So the only way by which we can be declared to be in a right standing before God is on the basis of the death

of Jesus Christ for our sins, he bearing our punishment, and by the application of Christ's righteousness to us by God's grace. This grace is received through the channel of human faith, but it is nevertheless utterly of grace. It is apart from all deserving.

Is Etymology Helpful Here?

"Justification" is what this great section of Romans is all about, and we need to see the passage's force. But before getting into the text, let me mention another reason why some people might be confused about justification and thus misunderstand it—the problem lies with the word's etymology, its linguistic history.

Anyone who knows Latin can tell at a glance that "justification" is constructed out of two Latin words: *iustus* and *facio*, *facere*. The first word is an adjective meaning "just," "equitable," "fair," or "proper." In legal terminology it means "having a right status in reference to a law." We have preserved the Latin term in English words like "just," "justice," and "justify." The second word is a verb; it means "to make" or "to do." We have it in such words as "factory," which is a place where things are made, or "manufacture," which literally means "to make a thing by hand." Putting these two Latin words together, we have a meaning for "justification" that would go something like this: "to make just, right, or equitable." Used of people, this would suggest that they are literally to be made righteous.

But here the etymology of the word *justification* is misleading to most English speakers. The reason is that "justification" actually refers *not* to a righteousness attained by or produced in an individual, but to the act of God by which the righteousness of Christ is credited to that person.

The context of Romans 5 is of great help in coming to understand and appreciate this term. You will remember from the list of contrasts I presented earlier that justification is contrasted with condemnation in verse 18: "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was *condemnation* for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was *justification* that brings life for all men." If this is the contrast, we

need to ask what happens when people are "condemned." Does the act of condemnation make them lawbreakers? To use biblical terminology: Does it make them sinners? Or does it merely mean that they are declared to be such? The answer is: It means that they are *declared* to be sinners. They are lawbreakers already. The act of condemnation merely declares this to be so and subjects them to whatever penalty the law in the case prescribes.

The same idea applies to justification. Even though the etymology would suggest that justification means "to make just or righteous," the term actually means "to declare one to be in a right standing before God's law." In human courts, this might be on the basis of the individual's own personal righteousness. But this can never be the basis in God's court, since no one is truly righteous, as Paul has shown in the preceding chapters.

How can God declare us to be righteous, then? Only on the grounds of Jesus' own perfect righteousness imputed to us. That is, we are justified by God by grace alone.

There is another explanation derived from the wording of verse 19. Paul says that on the basis of Adam's one act of disobedience many "were made sinners." We have already seen how that is to be taken. It does not mean that all were affected by sin and thus became sinning individuals, though that did happen and is true. Rather, here it means that the entire race was declared to be sinful because of Adam's sin. That is why death passed upon all, even upon those (like infants) who died before they had any opportunity to sin. If "the many were made sinners" in that sense, it must be in a corresponding sense that "the many will be made righteous," namely, through the one act of obedience by Jesus Christ.

The Obedience of Christ

This brings us to another important idea: the obedience of Jesus. Paul mentions this in verse 19, and it is the first time he has used the word. He has really been speaking of the difference between Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience all along, but up to this point he

has used different terminology. What is the significance of his use of the phrase "through the *obedience* of the one man" here?

In discussing the obedience of Christ, theologians usually distinguish between what is called the active obedience of Jesus and the passive obedience of Jesus.

The *active* obedience of Jesus refers to his submission to and active conformity to the law of
Moses. Do you remember how in Galatians Jesus is described as having been "born under law, to redeem those under law" (Gal. 4:4-5)? This means that when Jesus became man he deliberately subjected himself to the law of Moses, so that when he went to the cross to die for our sin, it might be known that he did so as a perfect sin-bearer, "a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19).

Jesus' baptism signified the same thing. When Jesus came to John to be baptized, John protested at first, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). He meant that Jesus was perfect, that he needed no baptism of repentance from his sins. But Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). In other words, Jesus did not come to John for a baptism of repentance, as the others were doing, for he had no sin for which to repent. By his baptism he identified with us, putting himself under law as our federal head or representative. The law was there to be kept, and Jesus kept it. Throughout his life he exercised a full and active obedience to God's standards and thus showed himself to be the only acceptable sacrifice for sin.

The *passive* obedience of Jesus Christ is something else. It refers to his submission to the cross. Do you recall how Jesus wrestled with this in Gethsemane? He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me..." (Matt. 26:39). Jesus was not asking if he could somehow escape the cruel death of crucifixion. It was his being made sin for us that troubled him. He was to be placed on the cross, and the full weight of the sin of men and women was to be placed on him and punished there. The Father was even going to turn his back upon him.

That is what Jesus dreaded and what he referred to when he asked if there were not some other way open.

This was Jesus' passive obedience, and it is what Paul is referring to when he speaks of "the obedience of the one man" through which "the many will be made righteous." Christ's active obedience qualified him for this role. But it was his one act of passive obedience, corresponding to Adam's one act of disobedience, that atoned for our sin and made it possible for the Father to credit Jesus' righteousness to our account.

Where Are Your Sins?

But enough explanation. Here is an illustration from the life of Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of my predecessors as pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. It is the story of his conversion.

When Barnhouse was about fifteen years old he heard the testimony of a man who had been a narcotics addict but had been delivered from that life and become a minister of the gospel. Barnhouse approached the man and asked about his experience of Christ, because he believed that the preacher had something he himself lacked. The preacher gave him an object lesson. He took Barnhouse's left hand, turned it palm upward and then said intently, "This hand represents you." On it he placed a hymnbook, saying, "This book represents your sin. The weight of it is on you. God hates sin, and his wrath must bear down against sin. Therefore, his wrath is bearing down on you, and you have no peace in your heart or life." It was a good statement of the truths in Romans 1, and Barnhouse knew it was true.

Then the preacher took the young man's other hand and said, "This hand represents the Lord
Jesus Christ, the Savior. There is no sin upon him, and the Father must love him, because he is without spot or blemish. He is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased." There were Donald's two hands, the one weighted down by the heavy book, the other empty. Again he knew it was true. He had the sin. Jesus had none.

Then the older man put his hand under Barnhouse's left hand and turned it over so that the book now came down on the hand that previously had been empty. He released the left hand, its burden now transferred to the hand that stood for Jesus. Then he said, "This is what happened when the Lord Jesus Christ took your place on the cross. He was the Lamb of God, bearing away the sin of the world."

While the hymnbook representing Barnhouse's sin still rested on the hand representing Jesus Christ, the preacher turned to his Bible and began to read verses that taught what he had just illustrated.

First Peter 2:23-24: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sin in his own body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness...." Isaiah 53:4-6 (the verses to which Peter was referring):

> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
> yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.
> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
> and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The preacher stopped reading and addressed the young man directly. "Whose sins were laid on Jesus?" he asked.

"Our sins," Barnhouse replied.

"Whose sins does that mean?" the preacher probed.

"Our sins," came the same answer.

"Yes, but whose sins are those?"

"Well, everybody's sins—your sins, my sins..."

The older man interrupted and caught the words almost before they were out of Barnhouse's mouth. *"My* sins; yes, that's it," he said. "That's what I want. Say it again."

Young Barnhouse obeyed. "My sins," he repeated.

The preacher then went back to Isaiah 53:6. He put the hymnbook back on Barnhouse's left hand and pressed down upon it as he read, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." The pressure was strong. But then he turned the book and hand over once again, so that the burden was transferred to the hand that represented Jesus Christ, and he continued his reading: "and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Barnhouse understood it then, and he never forgot it. In fact, he used that very illustration to teach many others about justification and lead them to the Savior. He also expanded it. For just as the transfer of the hymnbook showed the transfer of our sin to Jesus, where it has been punished, so also is it possible to show the transfer of the righteousness of Christ to us by movement in the opposite direction. As I showed when we were studying Romans 4, a double transfer is involved. Barnhouse used a Bible to show this corresponding reality.

Horatio G. Spafford knew these truths. He wrote:

> My sin—O the bliss of this
> glorious thought!— My sin, not
> in part, but the whole,
> Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more:
> Praise the Lord!
> Praise the Lord! O my soul.

All of Grace

But this double transfer is all of grace! Nothing compelled God to act this way toward us.

Nothing made Christ die for your sin or made God credit the righteousness of his Son to you. There was nothing in you, under that great blanketing weight of sin, that drew his love downward. God did it because it pleased him to do it, and because it is his nature to be gracious.

At the end of his very excellent treatment of these verses, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asks whether we have understood the doctrine of justification by grace, and suggests (rightly I think) that there is a connection between understanding this and being truly saved. He does not mean that everyone who is saved understands everything about justification, of course. None of us does. He means that if these truths seem impossible or even crazy to you—if you are objecting, "But how could God possibly treat us as if we were in Adam and as if we are in Christ? How can he save us because of something someone else has done?"—it is probably because you are not saved.

For those who are not saved, these doctrines will always sound foolish. They may even sound like an invitation to sin, which is the objection Paul deals with in the very next chapter of Romans. It will always be thus, for how can those who do not possess the Spirit of God understand spiritual matters? Ah, but to those who are saved, these truths are wonderful. They are the very essence of life—which is, of course, what Paul speaks about here: "Justification that brings life for all men."

If you understand this and it seems right to you—not pointless, incorrect, or irrational—and if you believe it, you are one of those saved persons.

Chapter 73.
Law and Grace

Romans 5:20

At the end of Romans 5 is a short paragraph of two verses that a careless reader might be inclined to overlook, because at first glance the verses seem merely to be tacked on as an afterthought. We have followed Paul's argument in the previous nineteen verses of this chapter in detail, particularly from verse 12 on, and we have seen that the contrast between the sin of Adam and its consequences, on the one hand, and the obedience of Christ and its consequences, on the other, has at last been wrapped up. The sin of Adam led to condemnation and death. The righteousness of Christ led to justification and eternal life. This was so important to state that Paul has actually done so twice, once in verse 18 and a second time in verse 19.

Why, then, do we have a reintroduction of the "law," "trespass," "sin," "grace," "death," "righteousness" and "eternal life" in this short paragraph? Isn't it redundant? Wouldn't we be better served by moving on directly to chapters 6 and 7?

Well, the words are not redundant, and they are not unimportant. They are important for three reasons. First, they are a summary of what Paul has already been saying. That is why so many of the key terms of verses 12-19 are repeated. Second, they are a capsule treatment of the themes that chapters 6 and 7 will develop in detail. One commentator says that the following chapters are "virtually nothing but an extended commentary" on these verses. Third, verses 20 and 21 answer a question that has not been answered but has been suggested by something Paul wrote earlier. It is this question (and the answer) that concern us now.

Why Was the Law Given?

Verse 20 begins by mentioning the law. So let's back up a moment to what Paul has already said in Romans about the law of God. He has said two important things.

First, he has pointed out that the law was not given as a way by which we can be justified. The Jewish people thought differently. They believed that one could be justified by observing the law, which was

Judaism's greatest treasure. But Paul has been at pains to disabuse the Jew of this opinion. "The law tells you what you should do," he says, "but it does not enable you to do it. All it does is reveal that you are a sinner." Paul made this clear in Romans 3, where he said: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (vv. 19-20).

Second, in Romans 5:12-19 Paul has gone further, showing that the law was not even necessary to condemn us, since we have all already been condemned for the sin of our first parent, Adam.
It is because of his trespass, not our own, that "the many were made sinners" (v. 19).

Can you see how someone might be confused at this point? A person might say, "Paul, you have shown us that the law was not given as a means of justification, and we accept that. You have also shown that the law was not even necessary to condemn us, since we have all already been condemned for the sin of Adam. That is harder for us to understand, but we are willing to accept that, too. But look: If these two things are so, then please tell us, what was the purpose of the law? If we cannot be saved by the law and if the law is not even necessary for our condemnation, why was it given? What does it do? Does it, in fact, do anything? As we look at it now, the law of God seems to be without a real purpose."

This is the question that has not been answered but was suggested by Paul's mention of the law earlier in Romans 5, particularly in verses 13 and 14. His answer is in verse 20, our text: "The law was given so that the trespass might increase...."

But that creates an entirely new set of problems, doesn't it? It seems to say that God wanted more sin and that he decided to create sin by giving the law. That can't be true. That is an obvious error. God is not the author of sin, nor does he encourage it. James says that he does not

even tempt us: "... God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13-14). If Romans 5:20 does not mean what on the surface it seems to mean, what does it mean? Why was the law "added"?

A proper approach to this verse is suggested by the word *added.* The Greek word is translated in various ways in the versions: "came in" (RSV and NASB), "keeps slipping into the picture" (Phillips), "intruded" (NEB), "was introduced" (TEV). But this is the same word that was used for the entrance of sin into the world in verse 12 ("therefore, just as sin *entered* the world through one man"), but with the prefix *para* (meaning "alongside of) joined to it. The literal meaning is:

"the law entered alongside of."

Alongside of what? Obviously, alongside of the sin that had already entered into the world. I point this out because, as soon as we see that God sent the law to be *alongside of sin*, we understand that the law was meant to exist in relationship to the sin that was already there. In other words, it does not cause sin, but rather does something to it. Since the sentence goes on to say that this was done "so that the trespass might increase," it must mean that the law somehow brought out the true nature and magnitude of sin so that it could be seen for what it truly is.

Moreover, as we are going to see, it was because of grace and in order that the grace of God might abound that God did this.

But we need to spell this out carefully. I have been greatly assisted at this point by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's careful treatment of this subject, and I want to follow his outline as I explore the ways in which the law increased (and was meant to increase) sin. There are three of them.

"I Would Not Have Known Sin, Except..."

The first way in which the law increased sin was by increasing our knowledge of it. This is what Paul is going to explain more fully in Romans 7, where he says, ".... I would not have known what sin was

except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet'" (v. 7). Obviously, the law did not make Paul covetous. He was that already. It merely showed him that he was.

Lloyd-Jones breaks this down into four parts, asking: How does the law increase our knowledge of sin specifically? Then he answers:

1. *The law defines sin for us.* Before the giving of the law we were in a sense like children. You know how it is with children. They have the seeds of sin in them and also behave sinfully. But there is a sense in which they often do not know that what they are doing or are inclined to do is sinful. They are selfish, for example. But they only begin to learn what selfishness is, and that it is wrong, when a teacher or parent explains that it is important to share the toys in nursery school. No one is allowed to hog them all. Or they are willful. But they discover what this is only when their wills are opposed by the wiser and steadier wills of their parents, expressed in a list of things they can and cannot do. In the same way, sin is defined for us by the written law of God.

Another way of saying this is that law turns sin into transgression. All wrong acts are sinful, even without the law. But they are only seen to be sin when they are exposed as transgressions of the law of God. Paul said this earlier in this letter: "For before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law" (5:13) and "... where there is no law there is no transgression" (4:15).

2. *The law reveals sin's nature.* The true essence of sin is that it is rebellion against God. But there is a sense in which we do not fully know that or understand it until we are confronted with the law pertaining to the case. I mean by this that most people have a God-given sense of right and wrong. Even the native in the jungle, without any knowledge of the Bible, has a certain moral code. But he does not know God, and as a result he does not know that violations of his code, which he knows he violates, are actually directed against the God who has given him his moral sensibilities.

To give an example: When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then conspired to have her husband killed, he would have known, even if he were an unenlightened heathen, that he had done wrong. Adultery and murder are not condoned anywhere. But because he was also an instructed member of God's chosen race, David saw his sin on a deeper level and therefore confessed it to be against God, saying: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight..." (Ps. 51:4). David had sinned against (as well as with) Bathsheba, Uriah, and the nation of Israel. But it was only when he saw his sin as being against God that its true horror gripped him and he was led to confess it openly.

3. *The law exposes sin's power.* Let me give an example here, too. There is a man who is a heavy smoker. A number of people suggest he should stop, and his reply is that he can stop smoking anytime he wants to. After all, he has proved it by stopping dozens of times. He really does not know (or will not admit) that he has a nicotine addiction. Then he visits his doctor, who examines him, tells him that his smoking is killing him, and orders him to stop. Now he has a law to deal with, the law of his doctor. "All right, doctor," he says. "I'll stop smoking." But when he tries to stop he finds that he really cannot do it. Before, he thought he could. Now, when the doctor's "law" commands him to stop, he discovers that he cannot. He needs help.

This is the way with us. And it is this sense of helplessness that has actually been a step in many persons' conversions. They supposed that the cure for sin was within their own power—until they were convicted by the law of God and actually attempted reformation. It was then they discovered their own spiritual inability and turned to Christ.

4. *The law unveils sin's deceit.* Until we are directly exposed to the law of God we excuse our conduct, calling sin by some lesser name or denying it. The written law shows us that sin is sin and that it has fooled us into taking it lightly. Only the law exposes the pitfalls on sin's primrose path.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones applies this first way in which the giving of the law increased sin by saying:

One of the greatest troubles in the church today, as well as in the world, is that men do not have a knowledge of sin as they should have. Sin is regarded very lightly and loosely.... Men are prepared to admit that they need a little help, and that they are weak in this or that respect; but the Scripture teaches the depth and the foulness, and the exceeding sinfulness of sin. Our fathers, our grandfathers, and especially those who preceded them, knew all about this, and it was in such times that great spiritual revivals occurred. It is when men and women realize the depth of iniquity and sin that is in them that they begin to cry out to God. But if men have no real knowledge of sin, if they are lacking in the knowledge of sin which is given only by the law, then they will be content with a superficial evangelism. This is surely one of our main troubles today.

Those words state the case exactly.

Conviction of Sin

But the law does not only bring a knowledge of sin by defining it and exposing its power and its true and deceitful nature. It convicts us of sin, which is where the points in the previous section have been leading. Does the law also do the opposite? Yes, it sometimes does that: It can harden the heart. But when the Spirit of God is moving, the preaching of the law brings conviction and teaches those who have been convicted of sin to recoil from it.

Why does that happen? It is because the law reveals sin to be an offense against God, as I said earlier. As long as we think of sin only as a violation of some abstract moral code, it will not trouble us very much. We will just try to get away with the sin if we can. Sin will not even trouble us if we think of it as violation of a law made by other human beings. Why should their will restrict us? However, when we discover sin to be against the God who has made us and who has provided us with all good things, when we see that it is a rebellion against our

Creator—an offense and an insult to him—we then experience real conviction.

In Romans 7, where Paul is discussing the role of the law at length, he not only says that the entrance of the law gave knowledge of sin. He adds that it awoke sin and allowed sin to produce even more sinful desires: "But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire..." (v. 8).

This idea is not hard to understand. Everyone knows how the knowledge of a law somehow produces the desire in us to break it. If we are going down the highway at what we regard as a reasonable speed and see a sign restricting us to a speed we judge to be unreasonable, often we do not slow down. We hold our speed constant, and at times we even increase it. Do you remember Prohibition? I am told that during those days people who did not drink before became drinkers, and the sale of alcoholic beverages went up. A related story is told about John Nance Garner (who later became vice-president of the United States under Franklin Delano Roosevelt).
Supposedly, after the law prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages was passed, Garner would greet every visitor to his home by opening a cupboard, taking out a decanter and two glasses, pouring two drinks, and then saying solemnly, "Let us strike a blow for liberty."

This truly is the very nature of sin, and it is the coming of the law of God that reveals its stiffnecked nature within us.

Where Does Grace Come In?

Because we are studying grace in these concluding messages of Romans 5, at this point a person might well be asking, "Where, in the midst of all this definition and exposure of sin, can grace come in?" Or, to put it differently, "Why is this chapter entitled 'Law and Grace,' when thus far all we have talked about is law?"

There are several answers to those questions. Let me give two of them.

First, the very exposure of sin is an act of grace by God. He did not need to give the law. He could have left us in ignorance, allowing us to suppose in our blind sinfulness that all was well with us, when actually we were under his wrath and were perishing. He could have left us to compare ourselves with other persons, as a result of which we all inevitably suppose that we are fairly good. But, by giving us the law, God has disabused us of those fantasies and allowed us to see our condition as it truly is. The first step in seeking a doctor is to know that you are sick. In order to seek salvation you must know you need it.

Second, the law contained an anticipation of the gospel. The law was given at Mount Sinai amidst many visible demonstrations of God's presence. God declared what the people of Israel were and were not to do: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates....

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Exodus 20:2-10, 12-

7 But that is precisely the code of law we have broken! What can we do?

Here is where the grace of God comes in. For in addition to giving us the law, which exposes our sin and shows us our deep need, God at the same time also pointed to the sacrifices by which sin might be punished and the guilt of sin be removed. At the very time God gave Moses to the people, God also gave them Aaron and the priests.

God showed how, when the people sinned, they were to take an animal and present it to the priest, who would then kill it and offer it up on the altar. It was a way of acknowledging the grim nature and dread consequences of sin—"The soul who sins... will die" (Ezek. 18:4b)—while, at the same time, it was also a way of portraying the grace of God, who was thereby shown willing to accept the death of an innocent substitute rather than requiring the sinner's own death and condemnation.

All this pointed forward to the atonement provided by Jesus Christ.

And remember that *he* did not take the law lightly! Philip E. Hughes writes:

Jesus when he came to save the world did not set aside the law: he fulfilled it—that is to say, he kept the law fully, without fault or lapse. In contrast to all other men, who are lawbreakers, he is the sole law-keeper. He alone is without sin (Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22). He alone

is full of grace and truth (John 1:14; 14:6). He is Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1). This perfect obedience of Christ to the law is an essential element in the salvation which he came to procure for us.... The first stage of his work of salvation required that, *as man,* he should keep fully the law of God which mankind had broken. Only thus would he be qualified to offer himself, as the spotless Lamb of God (1 Peter 1:18-19), in sacrifice for man.

Which is precisely what he did! For, as Paul writes in Galatians, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). At the cross of Christ the law of God and the grace of God met, and each was fully satisfied.

God's grace saves us from the law's condemnation. And what is more, as we will see in our study of Romans 6 and 7, that same grace of God enables those who were once lawbreakers to become law-keepers. Both the law of God and the grace of God are magnified.

Chapter 74.
Abounding Grace

Romans 5:20

The second half of Romans 5:20 is one of the truly great verses of the Bible. Even in the midst of a book in which every sentence is splendid, Romans 5:20 stands out like a brilliant beacon on a dark and dangerous night. The dark background is sin and its horrible proliferation in the world. But the beacon flashes, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more."

This sentence is so wonderful that it is difficult to do justice to it, especially in translation. In the
New International Version the word *increase* is used twice: once of sin, which is said to have "increased," and once of grace, which is said to have "increased all the more." This is a reasonably accurate translation.

But it is weak, because Paul used two different Greek words for the two kinds of increase, and the strength of the verse is enhanced by the resulting contrast.

The Greek word that refers to the increase of sin is based on a term (*polys*) meaning "much" or "many." So the verb (*pleonazō*) has the idea of a numerical increase. The NIV translation of this first verb is not bad, since it means "to increase in number," "grow," or "multiply." The second word is different, however. It is the verb *perisseuō*, which means "to abound," "overflow," or "have more than enough." This verb does not have to do with numbers so much as with "excess." However, lest we miss the point, Paul adds the prefix *hyper* (we would say "super"), which gives the word the sense of "superabundance" or "abundant excess."

Most people probably know this verse best in the Kings James translation, which uses the idea of "abundance" for both parts of the comparison: "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." The New American Standard and the Revised Standard Bibles do better by using "increase" for the first part and "abound" for the second: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

But how about this? The New English Bible says, "Where sin was thus multiplied, grace immeasurably exceeded it."

Or this? J. B. Phillips paraphrases the verse, saying, "Though sin is shown to be wide and deep, thank God his grace is wider and deeper still."

Even this does not seem to satisfy the commentators, however. One of them suggests, "Where sin reached a high-water mark, grace completely flooded the world." Another says, "The idea is that of an overflowing, as if a mighty flood were let loose, sweeping everything before it. Indeed, we might well use the term 'engulfed'; such an abundance, such a superabundance that it drowns and engulfs everything."

What Paul says of grace in this verse prepares us for what he is going to say in the continuation of the sentence. In verse 21 he is going to show

that although sin has triumphed over us, grace has now triumphed over sin and reigns victoriously.

John Bunyan's Text

Romans 5:20 is the text of John Bunyan, the English Puritan preacher who is best known as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress.* But although that book reflects his spiritual experience, Bunyan's life and religious progress is spelled out best in his classic devotional autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners.* The title is taken from our verse and 1 Timothy 1:1316.

Bunyan was born in 1628. His parents were poor. His father was a traveling tinker, that is, a mender of pots and pans, and Bunyan practiced this trade for a time, as a result of which he was known as "the tinker of Bedford." He had little formal education, though he was an avid reader. In his youth he was quite profligate and in time became greatly troubled by an acute sense of personal sin. He wrote of himself in those days that it seemed "as if the sun that shineth in the heavens did grudge to give light, and as if the very stones in the street, and tiles upon the houses, did bend themselves against me; methought that they all combined together to banish me out of the world; I was abhorred of them, and unfit to dwell among them, or be partaker of their benefits, because I had sinned against the Savior."

God saved Bunyan and gave him great peace, and the title of his autobiography is testimony to what he discovered. He had learned that, no matter how great his sin was, the grace of God proved itself to be greater.

No Withholding of Grace

I want to make two points about this superabounding grace of God, and the first is this: *Grace is not withheld because of sin.* We need to understand this clearly, because in normal life you and I do not operate this way. If we are offended by someone, we tend to withdraw from that person and restrain any natural favor we might otherwise show. If

someone offends us greatly, we find it hard even to be civil. God is not like this. On the contrary, where sin increases, grace superabounds.

What happened when Adam and Eve sinned? They feared that God would withdraw his grace, as he had every right to do. Although God had been good to them, they rebelled against his command concerning the forbidden tree, and God had said, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). When God came to them, calling in the garden, they hid in terror, thinking that the threatened judgment would now be fully executed. Instead, they found grace abundant.

Donald Grey Barnhouse has written:

Adam had not gone very far from the scene of his rebellion before the grace of God sought him, called him by name, pursued him in the obscurity of the grove where he was hiding.... God did not withhold his grace because of Adam's sin. Instead, he made great promises of grace, announcing that the Messiah would come, the Deliverer, the Seed of the woman, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would destroy the destroyer and bring man back into fellowship with himself. Although man... sought to cover his shame with fig leaves, God intervened in grace and clothed the guilty pair with coats of skins, in the very garden where they had rebelled. The first blood ever shed upon this planet was shed by God Almighty to provide covering for the man and woman who believed his word about the redemption that would be provided. Grace was not withheld because of sin; grace was given in spite of sin.

It was the same in the days of Moses, when the people had come to Mount Sinai and the law was being given. On the mountain God told Moses, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2-3).

But, while God was saying that, the people he had brought out of Egypt were breaking not only this command, but also all the other commands he was giving. They were taking his name in vain, dishonoring their

fathers and mothers, committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, coveting, and other things besides.

Was this a barrier to God's grace? Barnhouse, from whom I am quoting freely, replies, "Not at all. On the very mount whence God looked down on the awful sin of this people, he gave the specifications for the tabernacle, altar, priesthood, and the method of approach that honored his holiness and was consistent with his justice. 'Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.' Sin rolled as high as Mount Sinai; the grace of God rolled as high as heaven."

When we come to the New Testament, the same principle unfolds with ever-increasing splendor.
Peter denied his Lord, even with oaths and cursings. But Jesus did not condemn Peter. Instead, Jesus appeared to him personally following the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:5) and recommissioned Peter to service (John 21:15-19):

"Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" asked Jesus.

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," Peter answered.

"Then you must feed my lambs and take care of my sheep," Jesus countered.

The same thing was true of Paul, the apostle used by God to give us the text we are studying here. Paul's testimony is nearly identical to Bunyan's, which is why Bunyan paraphrased Paul's words to describe his own experience. Paul told the Corinthians, "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor. 15:810).

Near the end of his life Paul wrote to his young co-worker Timothy:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly [here he uses a combination of the two words found in Romans 5:20, the first of the two verbs plus the emphasizing prefix *hyper*, which is part of the second], along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:13-16

Now we come to you. Today most people have very little awareness of their sin, which shows how desperate their condition has become. But perhaps you are one who, like John Bunyan, is very conscious of your sinfulness. You may consider yourself to have forfeited all hope of salvation by some sinful action that rises up before you like a great concrete dam against grace. I do not know what that transgression is. It may be some gross sexual sin or adultery. Or it may be a perversion.

Perhaps you have stolen from your employer or your parents or someone else who is close to you.

Have you destroyed somebody's life work or reputation?

Committed murder?

Perhaps you remember a time in your life when you were so tyrannized by sin that you lashed out against God with blasphemies. Perhaps you cursed God. Perhaps you called down damnation on yourself. When you think back on those days—and they may not be long in the past—you shudder and tremble. You are sure you have passed beyond all bounds of hope, that you are destined to be lost eternally.

If you are such a person—fortunate at least in your knowledge of your sinfulness—then this text is a great cry of hope for you: "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more." Where sin multiplied, grace

overflowed! No dam erected by sin can hold back the abundant flow of God's grace. Grace is never withheld because of sin—not Adam's sin, not the sin of the people at Sinai, not Peter's sin, not Paul's sin, not John Bunyan's sin—not *your* sin. Therefore, you may come to God through Jesus Christ. Right now. Regardless of what you have done, you can repent and find full forgiveness in Jesus.

Have you done that? If not, will you do it now? Paul said that even "God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

No Depletion of Grace

The second point I want to make about the superabounding grace of God is that *God's grace is never reduced because of sin.* There is an unlimited supply of grace available.

Some people mistakenly suppose that there is only so much grace to go around. They envision God as looking down on mankind and seeing a great variety of sinners in need of salvation. One man is fairly good, but he is not perfect. He can only be saved by grace, of course, so God dips into his bucket of grace and splashes out just enough for this man to find Christ and salvation.

Here is another person, a woman. She is not as "good" as the man. She needs more grace. Finally, here is a very terrible person. He has committed every sin in the book and is not the least bit inclined toward God or godliness. This man is also saved by grace, but it takes a lot of grace to save him. God has to scrape the very bottom of the bucket to get this vile profligate in.

All this is a gross misunderstanding. Grace is not something that is depleted as it covers our deficiencies. Furthermore, by grace God provides one hundred percent of what is necessary for the salvation of one hundred percent of the people he is saving. Grace is not doled out in proportion to our misdeeds. And God's superabundant supply never runs dry!

There is another error related to the first. Imagine a man who was once walking close to God but who fell into some great sin. I do not care what sin it was. It may have been Moses' sin, David's sin, your sin. Having fallen into sin, this man now thinks that he has forfeited something of God's grace. It is as if he had originally been given one hundred percent of God's grace but now supposes that he is slowly wasting away this treasury of grace by his major transgressions.

Do you ever find yourself thinking that? Are you thinking that now? That you were saved in the past and you were once a first-class Christian; but now, having sinned, you are condemned to be only a second-class or third-class Christian forever? Forget that idea. Your sin did not keep God's grace from flowing to you in full measure when you came to Christ. It will not keep grace from you now.

I do not mean to suggest even for a moment that God condones sin. God hates sin so much that he sent Jesus Christ to die to rescue men and women from its destructive rule and tyranny. He hates sin in you. He will continually work to remove it and give you victory over it. But the point I am making here is that God will never diminish his grace toward you because of your sin. In fact (Can I say it this way and not be misunderstood?), it is in your sin that you will most find grace to be abundant. The reason Paul was such a champion of grace was that he had been forgiven a great deal.

And do not think that you can fall from grace! I know that phrase is in the Bible. It is in
Galatians 5:4, which in the New International Version is translated, "You have fallen away from grace." But let me tell you what that means. It does not mean, "You have lost your salvation." It means, "You have fallen into law as a way of living."

The Galatians had been taught the true gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, but they had been confused by Jewish legalists, who had been teaching that it was necessary for them to keep the law of Moses to be saved. Particularly, they had been insisting that Gentile believers must be circumcised. Paul's letter to the Galatian church was written to

refute that heresy and encourage the Galatians to stand firm in the freedom Christ had purchased for them and not be entangled again in legal bondage. The related text says, "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:2-4).

What happens when you fall away from grace?

You do not lose your salvation. If you could, that sin of yours in falling from grace would diminish grace, and we have already seen that grace is neither withheld nor reduced because of sin. What happens is that you fall *into* law! You become a miserable legalist instead of a joyous thriving Christian.

But, even then, grace will still be working to deliver you from your bondage.

Grace to a Slave of Slaves

In the first volume of these studies, in a commentary on Romans 3:22-24, I told the story of John Newton, the "slave of slaves" who was miraculously delivered by God. I want to tell it again here, since we are dealing with the text that, of all texts in Scripture, most aptly describes Newton's experience.

Newton lived from 1725 to 1807. He was raised in a Christian home in which he was taught verses of the Bible. But his mother died when he was only six years old, and he was sent to live with a relative who hated the Bible and mocked Christianity. One day, at an early age, Newton went to sea as an apprenticed seaman. He was wild and dissolute in those years, as John Bunyan had been. He had the dubious reputation of being able to swear for two hours without repeating himself. At one point Newton was conscripted into the British Navy, but he deserted, was captured, and then beaten publicly as a punishment. Eventually he was released into the merchant marine and went to Africa. Why Africa?

In his memoirs he wrote that he went there for one reason only: "that I might sin my fill."

In Africa Newton fell in with a Portuguese slavetrader in whose home he was cruelly treated. This man often went away on slaving expeditions, and when he was gone the power in the home passed to the trader's African wife, the chief woman of his harem. This woman hated all white men, and she took out her hatred on Newton. For months he was forced to grovel in the dirt, eating his food from the ground like a dog and beaten unmercifully if he touched it with his hands. In time, thin and emaciated, Newton made his way to the sea, where he was picked up by a British ship on its way up the African coast to England.

When the captain of the ship learned that the young man knew something about navigation as a result of his time in the British Navy, he made him a ship's mate. Even then Newton fell into trouble. One day, when the captain was ashore, Newton broke out the ship's supply of rum and got the crew drunk. He was so drunk himself that when the captain returned and struck him on the head, Newton fell overboard and would have drowned if one of the sailors had not hauled him back on deck just in the nick of time.

Near the end of the voyage, as they were approaching Scotland, the ship ran into bad weather and was blown off course. Water poured in, and she began to sink. The young profligate was sent down into the hold to pump water. The storm lasted for days. Newton was terrified, sure that the ship would sink and he would drown. But, there in the hold of the ship, as he pumped water desperately for life, the God of grace—whom he had tried to forget but who had never forgotten him—brought to his mind Bible verses he had learned in his home as a child. The way of salvation opened up to him. He was born again and transformed. Later, when the storm had passed and he was again in England, Newton began to study theology and eventually became a distinguished preacher, first in a little town called Olney and later in London.

Of this storm, William Cowper, the British poet who became a personal friend of Newton and lived with him for many years, wrote:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

And Newton, who became a poet as well as a preacher, declared:

Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Newton was a great preacher of grace, for he had learned on a very personal level that where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. He is an outstanding example of the truth that grace is neither withheld nor reduced because of sin. He is proof of the fact that God can save anybody.

Chapter 75.
God's Motives for Grace

Romans 5:20-21

There are many times in life when we examine another person's motives. And it is right that we should be acutely aware of them. A person can do something that turns out badly, but we may excuse the failure if his or her motivations were commendable. Or, by contrast, a person may do something good, but we will discount the apparently worthy act if, for example, it was done only to enhance the person's reputation or outdo someone else.

We have been talking about the grace of God for the past few studies, and probably at this point someone is beginning to ask about God's motives. We have seen that God operates by grace in saving men and women. If he did not, no one could be saved. But you may now want to ask whether the Bible reveals a reason for God's grace. Are there motives behind it? Why has God functioned in this manner?

Since these are valid questions, they might have occurred to anyone entirely "out of the blue," as we say. But even if they did not, they would certainly have been suggested by our text—for two reasons.

First, we have explored the contrast in verses 20 and 21 between the law of God and the grace of God. The first verse gives a motive for the entry of God's law, saying: "The law was added *so that* the trespass might increase...." When we studied that verse we saw what "increasing" the trespass meant: (1) the law increased sin by increasing our knowledge of it, that is, defining it for us, which is good; (2) the law increased sin by convicting us of sin, thus showing it to be an offense against God, which is also good for us to know; and (3) the law provoked even more sin in us, thereby uncovering sin's true nature. All this opened us up to grace. But if God's motives for giving the law are suggested and if the verse contains a contrast between the law and grace (as we have seen), what about the motivation underlying grace? The very fact that the first half of the contrast involves God's motives for the giving of the law causes us to look for his motives for the operation of grace also.

Then, too, the text itself encourages us to search for God's motives. The key word here is "so" or "so that," which occurs three times in verses 20 and 21. The first time is in reference to the law: "The law was added *so that* the trespass might increase." The second and third times are in reference to grace, in the first case comparing grace to sin (or law), and in the second case linking grace to its accomplishments. The sentence says: "Grace increased all the more, *so that,* just as sin reigned in death, *so also* grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The point is even clearer in the Greek text. For, after having stated in verse 20 that "grace superabounded," Paul writes the word *hina*, which means "in order that," thereby marking off what follows as an explanation of why God has been gracious.

In exploring this subject I have been helped by an excellent treatment of "God's Motives for Grace" by Donald Grey Barnhouse. It is a chapter in his multi-volume study of the Book of Romans. Barnhouse lists five motives for grace, and I want to follow his outline in this study.

To Do Us Good

The first motive for the superabounding grace of God is stated in our text, which says that God acted in grace in order "to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." This refers to all redeemed men and women, and it is a statement that one reason why God acts in grace, an initial reason, is that he might do us good.

Here is another verse that says exactly the same thing in Jesus' own words. You know it well: John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Like Romans 5:21, John 3:16 also has a purpose clause introduced by the important Greek word *hina*. But in John 3:16 the purpose for grace is expressed both negatively and positively. The negative statement is that we "shall not perish." The positive statement is that we "have eternal life." Some people have considered a motivation like this to be unworthy of God, as if the only

reason for grace is that Christians might escape hell's fires. If that were *all* there were to grace, there might be some point to the objection. Nevertheless, the desire of God to do us good is not unworthy of being mentioned, even by itself. For it means that *God* is good. Remember that: *God is good!* That is wonderful, is it not? It is something we should converse about and even shout about, because if God were not good, there would be no hope for any of us.

Barnhouse comments rightly: "The sinner who comes to Christ discovers this motive for grace. He can say: God does not want me to perish; God wants me to have everlasting life. God has done something about it.... How wonderful to me that God did not want me to perish! For I deserve to perish. How wonderful that God wanted me to have eternal life, for I deserve death."

To Enable Us to Do Good

The second motive for grace flows from the first, for if God is gracious to us because he is good, it is natural that he acts also in grace so that we, in our turn, might do good. The key text is Ephesians 2:8-10: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

It has been pointed out by more than one commentator that there is a striking repetition of the word *works* in verses 9 and 10. The first mention of works is negative. It tells us that because we have been saved by grace through faith, we are not saved "by works." Otherwise, it would be possible for a person who was saved "by works" to boast over another person who did not do these works and therefore was not saved. There would be boasting on earth and in heaven. But verse 9 utterly repudiates works as contributing to justification in any way. If we imagine that our good works have anything to do with our justification, we are not justified. We are still in our sins and therefore not saved.

On the other hand, no sooner has Paul emphatically repudiated works as having anything to do with the Christian's justification than he brings works in again, saying that God has created us precisely "to do good works." This is said in such strong language—"good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"—that we are correct in saying that if there are no good works, the person involved is not justified.

This may sound confusing to some. But the problem vanishes as soon as we realize that the "good works" Christians are called upon to do are the *result* of God's prior working in them. It is why, in verse 10, Paul prefaces his demand for good works by the statement "we are God's workmanship" and why, in his letter to the Philippians, he says in a similar vein, "Therefore, my dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13).

Let me say this another way. One reason why God has saved us by grace regardless of any merit on our part is that we might be enabled to be gracious to others regardless of any merit on *their* part. In other words, we are to do good to others as God has done good to us.

This is important, because it is only through such an altruistic and unselfish approach to benevolence that any uniquely original and compelling good works are done. What is wrong with so much of the "good works" of this world is that they are done for selfish reasons, for what the "do-gooders" can get out of it themselves. For example, a man will be helpful to those who can advance him up the career ladder or improve his social status, or a woman will be charitable because this will enhance her reputation. It is obvious that such "good works" do nothing to advance true goodness. What really advances goodness is when someone does good simply to do it—out of love for others—with no hidden, self-serving motive, such as getting something for oneself.

That is what God does in salvation, of course. And that is why those who have learned from God can actually be agents for good in this world.

To Make God's Wisdom Known

A third motive for God's grace is stated in another important verse in Ephesians. Paul has been speaking in Ephesians 3 of the way in which God has saved men and women from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds and has brought them together into one new body, which is the church, thereby overcoming the formidable natural barriers that formerly existed. He then says of God, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (v. 10). The "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" are the fallen angels. So the text means that one of the motives for grace was to reveal the wisdom of God to these beings. This raises the subject of God's motivation to the cosmic level, beyond the merely human level.

How does this principle operate?

Barnhouse writes:

When Lucifer and the angels were created, power was given to them on various levels. Lucifer became Satan, and many of the angelic beings—the principalities and powers—followed him in
his rebellion. They thought they had sufficient wisdom to govern, and to carry on the administration of creation without recourse to the authority and wisdom of God. The universe was engulfed, chaos came into the world, and sin's erosion became manifest to the uttermost part of creation. In the fullness of time, God revealed his plan of salvation. Christ would go down, down to the cross. Because of his death a great number of sinners would be called out of the world and form the true Church—the organism, not the organization. God would then exhibit these believers before the hosts of Satan as a demonstration of the true method of government and administration. Instead of seeking exaltation within themselves, all who have been redeemed recognize that there is no power within themselves. All that they accomplish is through total reliance upon the wisdom and power of God. Thus, in the very place where powerful and wise beings rebelled in their imagined self-

sufficiency, God took from men, greatly inferior to angels, a company which accomplishes what the latter could never accomplish.

The fallen angels sought to accomplish all by independence; we accomplish by total dependence.
They followed Lucifer who said, "I will ascend... I will exalt my throne... I will be like the most High" (Isa. 14:14). We follow the Lord Jesus Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

There is a wisdom here that the world will never understand. For the world says, "You've got to look out for number one" and "The devil take the hindmost." Yet, the way of the cross, not the way of self-seeking or self-advancement, is what overcomes evil and leads to true happiness.

His Body: The Fullness of Christ

The fourth motive for the superabounding grace of God in salvation is found in Ephesians 1:23, with its startling revelation of the church as "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

This is a difficult phrase to interpret, because it can be taken in three ways. First, it can be taken, not as a description of the church, but as a description of Christ, so that it would read: "[the church] which is the body of him [that is, Christ] who is the fullness of him [that is, God]] who fills all in all." This is appealing to many interpreters since the Bible elsewhere speaks of God as filling all things (Jer. 23:24) and asserts that the fullness of the Godhead does indeed dwell in Christ (Col. 1:19). On the other hand, this strength is also a weakness, since the Bible does not say anywhere that Christ is God's fullness. Besides, this interpretation just does not seem to be what the verse is talking about.

Second, it can be taken as referring to the church as that which somehow fills or completes Christ. Barnhouse holds to this view, illustrating it by the way a princess of relatively humble origins might be said to complete the glory of a great king, should he choose to marry her. John Calvin held to this interpretation, too, writing that "our Lord Jesus Christ, and even God his Father, account themselves imperfect unless we are joined to him." D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones holds it in a guarded fashion.

Third, the phrase can be taken in a passive sense, that is, of the church as that which Christ fills. This is the view of John Stott, who considers it far more natural to say that Christ fills the church, just as he also fills the entire universe, than to say (unnaturally, Stott thinks) that the church somehow fills or completes Jesus.

I think Stott is right in holding to the third of these positions. But I also realize that the difference between the third and the second is quite slight. Moreover, it is true beyond doubt that something of the splendors of Christ are to be seen only in his people, as they live for him and serve him— something of Christ that in any given historical situation would be seen in no other way. Just before his crucifixion Jesus prayed to the Father for those he was leaving behind, saying, "Glory has come to me through them" and "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:10b, 2223).

The point is that God has saved us by grace so that something of the nature of Christ, and even of the Godhead, might be seen in believers by the world outside. We might say that the chief place where the superabounding grace of God is to be manifested is in the saints.

To Exhibit God's Grace Eternally

The fifth motive for the salvational grace of God is "in order that in the coming ages he [that is,

God] might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). This text brings us back to Romans, for the exhibit of grace in believers is one of the elements involved in the "reign" of grace, which Romans 5:21 speaks of. We will be looking at this more closely in the next study.

Lewis Sperry Chafer has some thoughts on this motive in his book *Grace*, where he calls it the "greatest" of God's motives. He writes:

God's supreme motive is nothing less than his purpose to demonstrate before all intelligences— principalities and powers, celestial beings and terrestrial beings—the exceeding riches of his grace. This God will do by means of that gracious thing which he does through Christ Jesus. All intelligences will know the depth of sin and the hopeless estate of the lost. They will, in turn, behold men redeemed and saved from that estate appearing in the highest glory—like Christ. This transformation will measure and demonstrate the "exceeding riches of his grace."

The supreme purpose of God is to be realized through the salvation of men by grace alone. So fully does that supreme purpose now dominate the divine undertakings in the universe that everything in heaven and in the earth is contributing solely to the one end. To gain the realization of this supreme purpose, this age, which continues from the death of Christ to his coming again, was ushered in. These long centuries of human struggle were decreed for this one purpose. No vision which is less than this will prove sufficient. Men with blinded eyes do not see afar off. To such the world is moving on by mere chance, or to the supposed consummation of some human glory on earth. Eyes thus blinded see naught of the glory of heaven; minds thus darkened understand nothing of the supreme purpose of God in the demonstration of the exceeding riches of his grace. But when this age is consummated, it will be clearly seen by all beings in heaven and in the earth that these centuries of the on-moving universe have been designed for no other reason than the realization of the supreme purpose of God in the salvation of men by grace alone.

We speak often of a Christian world-view, but nearly as often we also fail to define it. Well, here is a Christian world-view that is very well defined: namely, that history is the field upon which the manifold grace of God in the salvation of sinners is displayed.

I have sometimes compared history to a play, the title of which is "God's Grace." The angels are the audience. We are the actors. Satan is there to do everything he can think of to resist God's purposes and discredit his grace. This drama has unfolded across the centuries, and in its early acts has starred such leading characters as Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, and the other *dramatis personae* of the Old and New Testaments and church history. There have been dominant players and minor walk-ons, strong persons and weaklings, but each has been brought onto the stage to speak the words God has written and all have contributed to the movement of the drama.

You and I are now the actors in this long-running play. Satan is attacking, and the angels are all straining forward to look on. Are they seeing the "manifold wisdom" of God in you as you go through your part and speak your lines? What kind of contribution does your life make to the drama known as "God's Grace"?

At the end of Barnhouse's study, to which I have referred several times, this great champion of grace wrote:

I have no doubt that in the ages to come—what we might call billions of years from now—there will be angels who will look at you and me with awe and wonder, and say to each other, "There are two of the saints! They were on earth in the times of the rebellion. They were dead in trespasses and sin. They were ungodly sinners, the enemies of God. But he loved them when they were like that. Think of that! How marvelous is his love! How great his condescension! How free his grace! He did all that for them!"

And we will say to those angels: "You were right in giving all glory to him. He is the wonderful one. He is the gracious one. There is none like

unto him." And amid all the ceaseless activities of heaven, while we are associated with him as the queen is with the king, we shall ever point to him as the source of all grace, and be, in ourselves, the exhibit of the exceeding riches of his grace.

Chapter 76.
The Reign of Grace

Romans 5:20-21

At the end of the last study I used the illustration of a play to show how God is exhibiting his grace in history and how you and I have been given important acting roles in that drama. I called the play "God's Grace."

The drama analogy is a good one, of course (or I would not have used it). But all such illustrations have a downhill side, and the downside of this one is that someone may think the theme is not a serious matter—just because I have called this a play. "After all," such a person might argue, "a play is just make-believe. It might be interesting, informative, even entertaining for a while. But nobody takes a play too seriously; after it is over, we all have to get back into the real world." If you found yourself thinking that way as a result of the last study, I want you to pay particular attention to this one. Because here I want to explore Paul's own illustration of what grace is about and show that the drama of "God's Grace"—Paul would call it "The Reign of Grace"—is as serious as it is real.

Rival Kingdoms

The illustration Paul uses is of two rival kingdoms, and the way he gets into his illustration is by personifying the power of sin, on the one hand, and the power of grace, on the other. He compares these powers to two monarchs, two kings, if you will. The one king is a despot. He has invaded our world and has established ruthless control over all men and women. The end of this king's rule is death, for all persons. This king's name is Sin. The other king is a gracious ruler. He has come to save us

from sin and bring us into a realm of eternal happiness. The end of this king's rule is eternal life. His name is Grace.

This illustration tells us something about grace that we have not yet adequately considered. It tells us that grace is a power. We tend to think of grace as an attitude; and, of course, it is that. We even define it that way. We call grace "God's unmerited favor toward the undeserving," in fact, toward those who deserve the precise opposite. But grace is more than an attitude. It is also a power that reaches out to save those who, apart from the power of grace, would perish.

This means that grace is more than an offer of help. It is even more than help itself. To use the illustration of the two rival kingdoms, it would be possible to say that grace is an invasion by a good and legitimate king of territory that has been usurped by another. The battle is not always visible, because this is a matter of spiritual and not physical warfare. But the attack is every bit as massive and decisive as the invasion of the beaches of Normandy by the Allied Forces at the turning point of the Second World War. The Allies threw their maximum combined weight into that encounter and won the day. In a similar way, God has thrown his weight behind grace, and grace will triumph.

The Kingdom of Grace

All earthly kingdoms have a beginning, perhaps a military victory that brings a new monarch to the throne, perhaps a peaceful succession in which a new and particularly able ruler takes over a government and begins a new era of influence and prosperity, perhaps an election of an outstanding ruler in a democratic land.

What was the origin of the kingdom of grace about which Paul is writing? When was it inaugurated?

The answer, to use the classic phrase of the apostle Peter, is "before the creation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20). In that verse Peter is referring to the decision made in the eternal counsels of the Godhead in eternity past to send God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be our Redeemer.

Theologians call this the Covenant of Redemption, and it took place before sin entered the world. In fact, it took place even before the world was created.

In that eternal covenant between the persons of the Godhead, God the Father said, "I want to demonstrate the nature and power of my grace before the hosts of heaven. To do that I am going to create a world of creatures to be known as men and women. I am going to allow them to fall into sin. I am going to allow sin to reign over them, enslaving them by its power and leading them at last to physical and spiritual death. But when sin has done its worst and the condition of the race seems most hopeless, I will send a heavenly being of infinite grace and power to rescue them and effect a new kingdom of love. Who will go for us? Who will accomplish the salvation of this yet-to-be-created race?"

The Lord Jesus Christ responded, "Here am I; send me. I will do what needs to be done. I will take the form of one of these creatures, thereby becoming man as well as God. I will die for them. I will die in their place, the innocent for the guilty, God for man. I will bear the punishment of their transgressions. Then, when I have paid the penalty for their sin so that they will never have to suffer for it, I will rise from the dead and be for them an ever-reigning and ever-gracious Lord."

So a covenant was enacted to establish a kingdom of grace, in which Jesus would die for a people whom God would give to him.

The Holy Spirit, who was also present at the inauguration of this kingdom, covenanted to lead those whom God had first chosen for this kingdom to faith in the crucified and risen Lord, by which alone they could enter it.

The Growth of God's Kingdom

Every earthly kingdom has a period of growth in which, the reign of the new monarch having been declared, territory is conquered and those who are to be part of the kingdom are drawn into it. There is also a parallel here to God's kingdom.

1. *The announcement of the kingdom.* God wasted no time in announcing the kingdom of grace. On the same day that Adam and Eve sinned, thus welcoming the contrary reign of sin and death into the world, God appeared in the Garden of Eden to foretell the coming of his Son. The words were spoken to Satan, who had been instrumental in our first parents' fall: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). This was a prophecy of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the atonement, and although Adam and Eve did not understand it fully, they understood enough of it to believe God and look for the coming of the Redeemer. As a result, they became the first citizens of the kingdom. They were saved by God's grace.

2. *The preparation for the kingdom.* The Old Testament records a long period of preparation for the new king's coming, and again the God of all grace was doing it. God established a godly line in the midst of the world's ungodliness, a line in which his name was remembered and faith in the coming Redeemer was kept alive. Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve who replaced godly Abel after Cain had killed him, was the first of this new line. From Seth came the line of the godly antediluvians, including such persons as Enoch, who "walked with God," and Noah, who received grace at the time of the great flood. Later Abraham was chosen, and from Abraham came Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons, the twelve patriarchs of Israel. There were priests like Aaron, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and godly kings like David. On the eve of the birth of Jesus, there were people like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna, and others, all of whom looked forward to Christ's coming.

"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised" (Heb. 11:39). They were saved by grace. They were part of the preparation for God's kingdom. But "The true light that gives light to every man was [only then] coming into the world" (John 1:9).

3. *The atonement.* The death of the Lord Jesus Christ for sin is the very basis and center of God's kingdom. So we are not surprised to find Paul thinking of this specifically as he unfolds his illustration, saying that grace reigns "through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:21).

His words remind us that grace does not mean the setting aside of God's law or the waiving of justice, as if God were saying, "Well, you have been bad, but it does not matter; I forgive you." Sin does matter. Sin is a terrible thing. It leads to death, death in this life (life without righteousness is "a living hell," as we say) and death in the age to come. God does not overlook sin. He deals with sin. Christ dies for it, and God counts Christ's divine and utterly perfect righteousness as ours. This is what Paul has been writing the entire Book of Romans to explain. It is what chapter 3 is particularly about. It is the doctrine with which he now ends chapter 5.

Do you want to see the nature of the kingdom of grace? There is no place you will see it better than at Christ's cross. There, grace and righteousness come together. Each is satisfied. It is by the death of Jesus that eternal life is "poured out for many" (cf. Matt. 26:28).

4. *The citizens of the kingdom.* It takes more than territory to make a kingdom. No one has ever gotten very excited over a king who ruled nothing but a desert. A kingdom requires subjects. Therefore, God is in the business of providing subjects for this kingdom. How? Theologians speak of the *ordo salutis* or the "order of salvation." It refers to the steps God takes to bring individuals into the kingdom of his Son.

First, there is *foreknowledge.* It means that God takes saving notice of them and sets his favor on them.

Second, there is *predestination* or *election.* This means that, in the eternal counsels of his will, God has determined to save them by bringing them to Christ.

Third, there is *effectual calling.* This is the call of the gospel, which is not merely general but which actually produces a proper, believing response in those who hear it. It is like the calling of Lazarus, which brought him from death back into life.

The fourth step is *regeneration.* This is a spiritual quickening or making alive. Everything that becomes good in us, including each of the next two items, flows from it.

The fifth step is *repentance and faith.* We turn from sin and believe on Jesus because we have been made alive.

Sixth, *justification.* This is the act by which God reckons our sin to be punished in Christ and Christ's righteousness to be ours.

Seventh, *sanctification.* The new life of Christ within the believer works itself out in an increasing growth of holiness and good works.

The final step is our *glorification,* in which we are made into the image of Jesus Christ, without sin, forever.

No more glorious unfolding of the kingdom of grace toward individuals can be imagined. For it is the power of God, providing for and then actually saving those who apart from it would certainly be lost. If grace were only a handout or an offer to help, we would perish. The only reason any of us are saved is that grace first provides the way of salvation and then actually reaches out to turn us from sin, quicken us, and draw us to salvation.

A Bountiful Kingdom

Much of what I have written already speaks to the nature of the reign of grace. But it is worth looking at this in detail, since we know that some of this world's kingdoms, though beneficial, are nevertheless hard to live with. We have looked at the inauguration of God's kingdom and the unfolding of it in history. What can we say about the nature of the reign of God's grace?

1. *Grace is bountiful.* The first thing we can say is that the reign of grace is bountiful. I mean by this that it is overflowing with benefits. We can think of a kingdom as "good" though it is nevertheless a very stringent one. For example, following a war, a good kingdom might make hard demands on its people and even require them to live without what we would think of as necessities. Of course, God does demand obedience, and in the Christian life sacrifice is required. But when we think of the reign of grace, we usually do not consider it in terms of sacrifice and denial so much as fullness of life and provision. The reign of grace is not something that any of the children of grace find odious.

In preparing for this sermon I read through dozens of studies of this text (there are many such studies, since commentators seem naturally to have been attracted to it), and I found many memorable statements. But among them is one from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones that I think is so ontarget that I want to repeat it more than once. I even suggest you memorize it. It is this: *"Grace always gives, whereas sin always takes away."* Let me say that again: *"Grace always gives, whereas sin always takes away."*

Sin—the despotic king—says the opposite. He tells us that he will give us all we have ever wanted, and that grace is the way of deprivation. Sin says, "Look at those Christians; they never have any fun!" Or, "Look at all the things they can't do." So, like the Prodigal, we listen to the bad king, take our inheritance and journey into a far country where we do not have to listen to the good king's voice or respond to the Father's wise will. What do we do there? You know the answer. We spend our assets on wild living. Because we waste our inheritance, when we come to the end of our days it is all gone. Sin has taken it all, and we find, as the Prodigal did, that no one will give us anything. In the end, when we look to the tyrant named Sin, whom we have followed, and ask for his help, Sin laughs at us as he reaches out to snatch away even life itself.

Follow sin, and sin will rob you of your innocence and character.

Follow sin, and sin will wither away your health.

Follow sin, and sin will turn to ashes even the common, precious things of life—things like friendship, love, laughter, the innocence of children, hope, and contentment.

Follow sin, and sin will usher you to damnation and smirk as you stagger through the door.

How different is the king whose name is Grace! Grace sees us staggering and comes alongside to help us and bear us up. Grace sees us destitute and pours the inexhaustible riches of Christ and the Father into our laps. Grace sees us dying and imparts eternal life. The Bible says through Paul that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

Grace says, "What do you need? Tell me. Tell me anything at all." And then grace provides that need in accord with God's perfect wisdom, invincible power, and unlimited supply. It is because of grace that the author of Hebrews urges: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

2. *Grace is invincible.* In this life it is not always true that the good triumph and the evil are defeated. Looking at this life, we might ask, "Can anything as good as grace really triumph in the end? To be sure, grace offers everything. But how can we know that in the end sin will not somehow still be there to assert its rule and snatch God's bountiful gifts from our hands?"

Ah, but that would be possible only if we were speaking of grace in human terms. If it were only my grace or your grace that we are talking about, sin would snatch our good gifts away. We could not stand against this powerful adversary. But it is not my grace or your grace that is reigning. It is the grace of God, and God is the Almighty One. Who or what can stand against God or his purposes? Paul writes in Romans 8:31-39:

... If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with

him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

> "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This brings us back to the first study in this volume, where I pointed out that all of Romans 5
(indeed, all of chapters 5-8) is designed to assure us of salvation. We can be assured of salvation because, through Christ, we have gained permanent access by faith "into this grace in which we now stand" (Rom. 5:2).

Here are two hymns for us to think of as we end these six studies of God's grace. The first is by Augustus M. Toplady, who is also the author of the well-known hymn "Rock of Ages." The hymn I cite here is "A Debtor to Mercy Alone," and I refer to it because of the word *indelible*, which occurs in the third and final verse. It goes:

My name from the palms of his hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on his heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure,
As sure as the earnest is given;

More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven.

Nothing can erase that which is indelible. So, if grace is written out in indelible characters, it is forever and ever. For the reign of grace there is no defeat, and there can be no end.

The other hymn is by Charles Wesley, and I would imagine every English-speaking Christian in the world has heard and probably also sung it:

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace!

There are no triumphs anywhere like those triumphs. There are none so happy or so certain. Let grace triumph in you. Yield to it. Yield to the grace of God in Christ. Open your arms to grace, and let grace draw you to the winning side.

Chapter 77.
Where Do We Go from Here?

Romans 6:1-2

The week before I was to start preaching in Philadelphia on Romans 6, I was at a Bible college for some meetings and mentioned my upcoming series to one of the school's professors. His reply was instantaneous: "Ah, that is a good Baptist chapter for a Presbyterian." The comment took me entirely off guard, because the chapter has nothing whatever to do with baptism, as I understand it. In fact, the only reason I can think of that this professor might have said what he did is that Paul uses the illustration of baptism in verses 3 and 4 to reinforce his earlier point about our being united to Jesus Christ by God's grace.

Actually, the sixth chapter of Romans is a parenthesis dealing with the first and most logical objection that anyone might bring against the

gospel, namely, that it leads to Antinomianism or sinful conduct.

Two Parentheses

But let me back up a moment. I have called Romans 6 a parenthesis, following the approach to Romans 5-8 by the English preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. But that arrangement is not universally accepted, and I need to explain this position.

You will recall that when we began chapter 5, I pointed out that I was departing from the most common outline of Romans, according to which these chapters (and especially chapter 6) deal with sanctification. In the traditional division of Romans, chapters 1-4 deal with justification, chapters 5-8 with sanctification, chapters 9-11 with the problem of Israel, and chapters 12-16 with practical matters. There is some truth to this arrangement, of course. The first chapters obviously do present the great doctrine of justification. The next section does touch on sanctification, the next mentions the Jews, and so on. But, as I pointed out in the first study in this volume, to approach Romans as if it were arranged in four segregated compartments is to misunderstand it completely. And, of course, an error in the overall analysis will lead to errors in handling the parts, which is particularly the case here.

What did we see when we began Romans 5? Some people have approached the chapter as if it is listing the *results* of justification, a sort of wrap-up of the previous chapters, after which the author supposedly launches into his second important theme, which is sanctification. But we saw that this is not the case at all.

What Paul is concerned to show in chapter 5 is that our justification is permanent. In other words, his concern is not with the results of justification, though some of these results are mentioned, but with the *assurance* of it. That is why he writes at the start of the chapter that "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (v. 2). Those words are a reference to the Christian's glorification, the ultimate and inevitable outcome of God's work in him or her. It is also why, a few verses further on, we find Paul saying, "Since we have now been justified by

his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (v. 9). These words anticipate the triumphant note on which the eighth chapter ends: "... If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31-32).

In Romans 5, as well as in Romans 8, the apostle passes directly from justification to glorification, not because he is unaware that sanctification fits into the middle of that sequence, but because he wants to stress the permanent nature of our justification: "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30).

Since I have not explicitly made this point before, let me also point out that this is the direction the second half of Romans 5 has been heading. Verses 12-21 deal with the Christian's union with Jesus Christ, showing that just as we were united to Adam, so that his fall became our fall and we were condemned in him, so also have Christians now become united to Jesus Christ, so that his death for sin became our death to it and his triumph ours. This, too, is permanent. So when Paul gets to the end of the chapter and speaks of the "reign" of grace "through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord," his point is that nothing is going to defeat God's great plan for us. In terms of the overflow of thought, what follows immediately after chapter 5 is chapter 8.

But if that is so, if these middle chapters of Romans are dealing chiefly with assurance, why are chapters 6 and 7 here at all? Or to put it another way, since I have called chapter 6 a parenthesis, why does Paul interrupt the flow of the letter at this point?

The answer lies in what he said in chapter 5. In verse 20 he said that the law of God was given "so that the trespass might increase." Then, in verse 21, he spoke of the triumph of God's grace in us. Anyone who has been thinking carefully about these things will see immediately that this introduces two problems. First, if grace is destined to triumph in us, as Paul says it is, doesn't this inevitably lead to loose living? In fact,

doesn't this even suggest that we should sin more so that grace might have even more space in which to be triumphant? That can't be right. But since it seems to follow from Paul's teaching, doesn't it discredit Paul's doctrine? The second problem concerns the law. In verses 12-21 Paul passed quickly from Adam to Jesus Christ. But everyone knows that between those two great historical events the law was given to Israel. The law must have had a purpose, or God would not have given it. But how can that be fit into Paul's teaching? If you retain the law, you destroy the gospel of salvation by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. But if, on the other hand, you retain the gospel, the law is superfluous.

These are valid questions. Rather than ignore them and pass on directly to what he says in chapter 8, the apostle stops at this point and answers them. He deals with the problem of Antinomianism in chapter 6 and with the problem of the law in chapter 7.

A Rational Objection

As we begin Romans 6, we see at once that we are not entering upon a radically new section, as if here for the first time Paul begins to address the problem of the Christian's sanctification. This is because the chapter begins with a question that immediately turns us back to chapter 5. "What shall we say, then?" Paul asks.

"Say about what?" we reply.

Obviously, about what he has just said in Romans 5: "... where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (vv. 20-21). In other words, where does the doctrine of the triumph of God's grace lead us? There are two possibilities. On the one hand, it could lead to sinful conduct, the antinomian objection. If sin is going to be conquered by grace, let us keep sinning. Sin doesn't matter. On the other hand, the triumph of grace could lead to righteousness, the position that Paul will actually uphold.

In one way or another, the entire sixth chapter is going to be an answer to this question. But before we launch into it, we need to take time to feel the full force of the objector's argument. I want you to see three things about it.

1. *It is logical.* I mean by this that it is a reasonable question to ask after one has understood the true gospel. The gospel is one of salvation by grace apart from human works. If that is so, if works are not the basis of our salvation, why do we have to worry about works at all? Shouldn't we just go on sinning?

The presence of this question is in one sense a test of whether or not one's gospel really is Pauline. Most religious teaching is not. Most religions tell you that in order to get to heaven what you must do is stop sinning and do good works, that you will be saved if you do this well enough and long enough. If a person is preaching along those lines, it is inconceivable that anyone would ever ask him, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Such a teacher is not talking about grace but about works, and his whole point is that salvation comes by doing lots of them. To "go on sinning" is the exact opposite of his doctrine. Nobody ever raises that question to one who is teaching works-righteousness.

But if one teaches, as Paul did, that a person is saved by grace apart from works, the objection we are looking at is the first thing that comes to mind. It is the argument religious people raised with Martin Luther. It was the question repeatedly thrown up to George Whitefield. Ray Stedman suggests, "There is something about the grace of God and the glory of the good news that immediately raises this issue."

2. *It is natural.* Stedman also talks about this point, saying that "sin is fun" and that "we like to do it." That may be too strong when we are talking about Christians, since a reaction against sin as well as an attraction to it will be present. But the point is well taken, at least in the sense that our "flesh"—or "sinful nature," to use Paul's own term (cf. Rom. 7:5, 18, 25)—inclines to sin naturally. To put this another way: As far as our old nature is concerned,

righteousness calls us to an unnatural path, the path of self-denial and cross bearing (cf. Luke 9:23).

3. *It is pious.* When I say that the objection that Paul's gospel leads to sin is "pious," I mean that it only occurs within a religious setting and among those who are at least somewhat concerned with being righteous. That is why it was it was such a major problem among the Jews.

In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul wrote of the gospel being "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." It was foolish to Gentiles, because it ran counter to their philosophy. They could not see how God could become man, since in their mind "spirit" was good while "flesh" was evil and, for God to become man, the "good" (God) would have to take on "sin" or in some way become "evil." Again, the Gentiles could not see how Jesus could be a Savior of others when, on the cross, he could not even save himself. These were their problems with the gospel. With the Jews it was different. The Jews had the law, and their religion was chiefly concerned with right conduct. Therefore, when Paul came along teaching that salvation could not be achieved by moral living but had to be a gift of God apart from good works, the Jews naturally saw this as an attack on practical righteousness and objected to it. It was their very religiosity that acted as a
"stumbling block."

If you do not see or care about the problem Paul raises at the start of Romans 6, you are obviously missing something. Either: (1) you have not yet understood the gospel; (2) you are blind to your own sinful inclinations; or (3) you are not really concerned about religion. On the other hand, if any of these things are true of you, you will not only see the problem but will be troubled by it.

An Unthinkable Position

And yet, you should not be troubled long. This is because, as soon as we begin to explore this problem, as Paul does in Romans 6, we see that the inference that Christians should "go on sinning" is unthinkable.

Paul's response, after he has asked the question, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" is, "By no means!" (v. 2). This expression has already occurred in a similar exchange in chapter 3, and it is a powerful one. The Greek words (*mē genoito*) literally mean "let it not be," and they have the force of a powerful negation. They actually mean, "It is inconceivable for it to be thus" or "It is unthinkable,"—"It should not even be considered." Some translators render the expression, "God forbid!"

Why is it unthinkable? "In fact," someone might ask, "isn't it even contradictory to suggest this? You have just said that the question posed in verse 1 is logical. You have admitted that it is both natural and pious. How then can you say that it should not even be considered?"

The answer, of course, is that although the objection is logical, natural, and pious on the
superficial level to one who is newly hearing the gospel of salvation through faith by the grace of God, it is seen to be completely untenable as soon as one probes further. In fact, one does not even have to probe deeply. The answer, given quite simply, as Paul does in the assertion that immediately follows his vehement repudiation, is "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" There have been so many misunderstandings of what Paul meant by the statement "we died to sin" that I want to devote our entire next study to explaining it. But even without a full investigation of this phrase we can already see the folly of the "let us go on sinning" position.

Why is this objection absurd? There are several reasons.

First, it overlooks God's *purpose* in the plan of salvation, which Paul has been unfolding. What is this purpose? Clearly, it is to save us from sin. What does that mean? Does it mean to save us only from the punishment due us because of our sin? It does mean that, but not only that. Yes, we are justified by God in order that we might be saved from wrath at the final judgment, but that is only one part of God's plan. Well, then, does salvation mean that God is saving us from sin's guilt? Yes, that too. But again, not only that. Sin brings guilt, so one of the

blessings of salvation is to be delivered from guilt, knowing that sin has not merely been overlooked or forgiven but has also been punished in Jesus Christ. Still, deliverance from the guilt of sin is also only a part of what is involved. How about deliverance from sin's presence? Of course! But again, that only happens at the end, when we are glorified.

Each of these matters is important. But the one thing that has not been mentioned thus far is salvation from the practice of sin *now,* and that is clearly also part of God's purpose. No one part of our deliverance from sin can rightly be separated from any other. So, if we go on practicing sin now, we are contradicting the very purpose of God in our salvation.

Second, the antinomian objection is absurd because it overlooks God's *means* of saving sinners. Our discussion of the early chapters of Romans was concerned with justification, the act by which God declares a person to be in a right standing before his justice due to the death of Jesus Christ. This is basically a declaration. But at the same time we saw that this is not all that is involved. God justifies, but Christ also redeems. God forgives, but the Holy Spirit also makes us spiritually alive so that we can perceive and by faith embrace that forgiveness.

Indeed, what has Paul been talking about in Romans 5? He has been talking about the believer's union with Jesus Christ, hasn't he? And what is that union like? It is not a mechanical bonding, or legal only. It is as vital as the union between a vine and its branches or between a head and the other parts of a person's body. Therefore, if we are saved, we are "in Christ." And if we are "in Christ," he is in us and his life within us will inevitably turn us from sin to righteousness.

One commentator says, "Union with Christ, being the only source of holiness, cannot be the source of sin." Therefore, if we find it possible to "go on sinning so that grace may increase," we only prove by our actions that we are not really saved. It is as simple and as strong as that! "We died to sin," Paul says—"How can we live in it any longer?"

Third, it is absurd to think that we can "go on sinning so that grace may increase," because, if we think that way, we have never understood God's *grace.* In the previous six studies, I said that grace is neither diminished nor withdrawn because of sin. That is, God does not cease to be gracious to us because we fall into sin. But just because grace is not diminished by sin does not mean that it is ever defeated by it. In fact, the contrary is true. As Paul said, "... grace increased all the more, so that... grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:20-21).

"What is the business of grace?" asks D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. "Is it to allow us to continue in sin? No! It is to deliver us from the bondage and the reign of sin, and to put us under the reign of grace." A reigning monarch is a triumphant monarch. If grace is reigning in us, grace is advancing its conquest over sin. Christians sin. But they are not defeated by sin, and they do not continue in it.

Do you understand the absurdity of the objector's question now?

"Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" If you understand the nature of grace, you will understand that for grace to increase, sin must decrease, not increase. The goal of grace is to destroy and vanquish sin. Therefore, if a person goes on sinning, as the objection suggests, it shows that he or she actually has no part in grace and is not saved.

Two Warnings

I close with two warnings, the first being obvious from what I have said, and the second being a deduction from it.

The first is directed particularly to the many people in religious circles who have much head knowledge about doctrine and who suppose, just because they know such things and give mental assent to them, that all is therefore well with their souls, that they are saved. That is not necessarily the case. If you are such a person, I need to warn you that it is not enough for you only to believe these things. Salvation is not mere knowledge. It is a new life. It is union with Christ. Therefore, unless

you are turning from sin and going on in righteousness, as you follow after Jesus Christ, you are not saved. It is presumptuous to believe you are. So examine your life. Make sure you are saved. The Bible warns you to "make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). The very doctrines of justification, grace, and sanctification urge this upon you.

The other warning is to all Christians, and it is in the words of an old Puritan preacher who asked in relation to our passage from Romans: "Is there anyone here who, by his conduct, gives occasion for this objection?" You may not believe—I hope you do not believe—that you can be saved and go on sinning. But is your life so careless that a unsaved person looking on might reasonably conclude that this is precisely where the doctrine of justification by grace leads Christians?

If that is the case, correct that impression at once. Remember our Lord's words: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck..." (Luke 17:1).

The writer to whom I was referring says, "It is a lamentable fact that one man who dishonors the gospel by an unholy walk does more injury to the souls of men than ten holy ones can do them good." I urge you to be part of the solution, part of the ten, rather than part of the problem. Let your life be marked by righteousness, not marred by sin—for your own soul's good as well as for the good of other people.

Chapter 78.
Death to Sin

Romans 6:2

From time to time in our Bible study we come across a verse that we immediately perceive to be of fundamental importance. Sometimes this is a personal matter; the verse speaks to us in a way we know it would not equally speak to others. If you have been a Christian for any length

of time and have been faithful in Bible study, you probably have many verses like that and can even tie them to specific times of trial, growth, or blessing in your life. There are other verses that are important in a broader sense. They stand out as classic statements of basic Bible doctrines. The verse we come to now is in this second category.

John Murray calls Romans 6:2 the "fundamental premise" of the apostle's thought in this chapter. That is quite literally true. In verse 1 Paul has raised an objection to his doctrine, asking the question that must have been asked him many times in the course of his ministry: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" His answer is emphatic: "By no means!" His explanation is straightforward: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (v. 2). That is the whole of his position. So there is a sense in which everything that follows in Romans 6 is an elaboration of that point. For one thing, he repeats the idea of our having died to sin in every verse up to and including verse 8. Verse 3—"All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death." Verse 4—"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death." Verse 5—"We have been united with him like this in his death." Verse 6—"Our old self was crucified with him." Verse 7—"Anyone who has died has been freed from sin." Verse 8—"We died with
Christ."

By the end of verse 10 Paul has explained his doctrine. Next he applies it, urging his readers: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). The application continues through verse 14. Then, in verse 15, Paul begins to do the same thing all over again but by using a different image, the image of slavery.

An analysis of the chapter shows that the idea of our death to sin is fundamental throughout. So our understanding of the statement "we died to sin" in verse 2 is critical to our understanding of the whole.

But the statement is even more important than that. For this is the first section of Romans in which Paul begins to talk about the Christian life specifically, that is, about living a life of holiness that is pleasing to

God. If Romans 6:2 is the key to understanding this section, it is therefore also obviously the key to understanding the doctrine of sanctification. To understand this statement is to understand how to live a holy life. And *because* it is the key to sanctification, I would go so far as to say that Romans 6:2 is the most important verse in the Bible for believers in evangelical churches to understand today.

"We Died to Sin"

Yet this is not an easy verse to understand. I want to handle it by first analyzing a number of wrong or inadequate explanations of what the key words, "we died to sin," mean and then giving what I believe is the proper understanding. Before doing that, it will be helpful to note exactly what the verse says.

There are two things to keep in mind. First, there is an emphatic use of the word *we.* As you may know, in the Greek language the pronoun subjects of verbs are included in the verbal endings. So it is not necessary to have a separate pronoun. However, when an author wants to emphasize the subject the pronoun can be explicitly added to the sentence, which is the case here. The thrust of the statement is to contrast the "we" who are now in Christ with (1) others who are not in Christ but who are still in Adam, and (2) even ourselves as we were before God saved us. This is an important key to the right interpretation. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The whole emphasis is on our uniqueness, our special position, we 'being what we are.' That is what makes the question of verse 1 unthinkable."

The second thing we need to keep in mind as we think through the various interpretations of this verse is the tense of the verb *died.* It is an aorist tense, which means that it refers to a single action that has taken place in and been completed in the past. We are going to see how important this is as we go along, since a number of people read the verse as if "died" were in a different tense entirely. Some treat it as if it were a present tense: "we are dying to sin." Some as a past imperfect tense: "we have died and are continuing to die to sin." Some as a future

tense: "we shall die to sin." But "died" is none of these things in this verse. It is an aorist and refers to a finished past action.

Five Misinterpretations

Since this verse is so critical to our understanding of why and how we are to live a holy life, we must proceed very deliberately. To do that we must begin by eliminating some of the misinterpretations. I want to discuss five of them.

1. *The Christian is no longer responsive to sin.* This is a very popular view, though a harmful one. It is an argument from analogy, and it usually goes like this: What is it that most characterizes a dead body? It is that its senses cease to operate. It can no longer respond to stimuli. If you are walking along the street and see a dog lying by the curb and you are uncertain whether or not it is alive, all you have to do to find out is nudge it with your foot. If it
immediately jumps up and runs away, it is alive. If it only lies there, it is dead. In the same way (so this argument goes), the one who has died to sin is unresponsive to it. Sin does not touch such a person. When temptation comes, the true believer neither feels nor responds to the temptation.

J. B. Phillips, the translator of one of the most popular New Testament paraphrases, seems to have held this view. I say this because his rendering of verse 7 reads, "a dead man can safely be said to be immune to the power of sin" and of verse 11, that we are to look upon ourselves as "dead to the appeal and power of sin."

What should we say about this? The one thing in its favor is that it takes the tense of the Greek verb translated "died" at face value. It says that Christians have literally died to sin's appeal. But the problem with this interpretation is that it is patently untrue. There is no one like this, and anyone who is persuaded by this interpretation to think he or she is like this is due to be severely disillusioned. Moreover, it makes nonsense of Paul's appeal to Christians in verses 11-13, where he says to "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do

not let sin reign in your mortal body.... Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness...." You do not urge one who is as unresponsive to sin as a corpse is to physical stimuli not to be responsive to it.

We can dismiss this interpretation, even though (unfortunately) it is held by many people.

2. *The Christian should die to sin.* This view has been common in a certain type of holiness meeting, where Christians are urged to die to sin. They are to "crucify the old man," which, they are told, is the secret to a "victorious" Christian life. The best thing that can be said for this view is that it is obviously correct to urge Christians not to sin. Indeed, that is what Paul himself will do later: "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body" (v. 12) and "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin" (v. 13). But aside from that, everything else about this view is in error. The starting point is wrong; it begins with man rather than with God. The image is wrong: one thing nobody can do is crucify himself. Above all, the tense of the verb is wrong; for Paul is not saying that we ought to crucify ourselves (or die) but rather that we *have* died. He is telling us something that is already true of us if we are Christians.

3. *The Christian is dying to sin day by day.* All this view means to say is that the one who is united to Christ will grow in holiness, and this is true. But it is not by increasingly dying to sin. It would be true to say that we will have to be as much on guard against sin's temptations at the very end of our lives as we need to be now, though we will do so more consistently and effectively then. To look at the verse that way, though it touches on something true, nevertheless gets us away from the proper and only effective way of dealing with sin. And what is equally important, the tense of the Greek verb for "died" is again wrong. This interpretation takes "died" as if it is an imperfect tense ("are dying"), rather than as an aorist ("have died"), which is what Paul actually says.

This is an important point, one that we are going to see again as we move through the chapter. I put it in this way: The secret of sanctification is not our present experience or emotions, however meaningful or intense they may be, but rather something that has already happened to us.

4. *The Christian cannot continue in sin, because he has renounced it.* This view carries no less weighty a name in its favor than that of Charles Hodge, and it is to be respected for that reason, if for no other. To begin with, the great former professor at Princeton Theological Seminary notes the full aorist tense of the verb *died,* saying rightly that "it refers to a specific act in our past history."

But what was that act? Hodge answers that it was "our accepting of Christ as our Savior." That act involved our firm renunciation of sin, since "no man can apply to Christ to be delivered from sin, in order that he may live in it. It is "a contradiction... to say that gratuitous justification is a license to sin, as much as to say that death is life, or that dying to a thing is living in it." This is a good interpretation for two reasons: (1) it recognizes the full force of the aorist verb *died,* and (2) what it argues is true. Coming to Christ as Savior really does include a renunciation of sin, and to renounce sin and at the same time continue in it is a real contradiction. If we had no other possible interpretations to go on, this would be an attractive explanation.

But I cannot help but feel that D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is correct when he rejects this as being other than Paul's meaning. Why? Because in Hodge's interpretation "dying to sin" is something we do. It is our act, the act of accepting Christ. However, in Paul's development of the idea, "dying to sin" is not something we do or have done but is something that has been done to us. It is the same as our being joined to Jesus Christ, which Paul is going to talk about in a moment under the figure of baptism. We did not join ourselves to Christ. Rather, we were in Adam, and then God by his grace took us from that position and transferred us into the kingdom of his Son.

It is because of what has happened to us that we are now no longer to continue in sin. It is because of God's work that our continuing in sin is unthinkable.

5. *The Christian has died to sin's guilt.* This last and, in my view, inadequate understanding of the phrase "we died to sin" is by Robert Haldane. He sees it as having nothing whatever to do with sanctification but rather as another way of talking about justification or one result of it. Haldane says, "It exclusively indicates the justification of believers and their freedom from the *guilt* of sin." The problem with that statement is the word *exclusively.* I put it that way because what Haldane says is undoubtedly true as far as it goes. The justification of the believer has certainly freed him or her from the guilt of sin, and it is true that in this sense the person has indeed died to it. As far as the guilt of sin and its resulting condemnation are concerned, sin no longer touches the Christian. He has nothing to do with it.

But that does not go far enough. True, we have died to sin's guilt. But what Paul is dealing with in this chapter is why we can no longer live in sin. If all he is saying is that we are free from sin's condemnation, the question of verse 1 is unanswered: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" At the end of chapter 5 the apostle spoke of the inevitable reign of grace; now (in chapter 6) we must be told why this is so.

Our Old Life and Our New Life

It is obvious, having rejected five important interpretations of the phrase "we died to sin," including no less weighty interpretations than those of Charles Hodge and Robert Haldane, that I must have a better view in mind—presumptuous as that may seem. But I think that is exactly what I do have, though I have certainly not invented this new view. It is expressed in various forms by such scholars as F. Godet, John Murray, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I have found the most helpful expression of it John R. W. Stott's *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8.*

Stott begins by noting that there are three verses in Romans 6 in which Paul uses the phrase
"died [or dead] to sin." It appears in verse 2, which we are studying, and it occurs again in verses
10 and 11. In two of those instances, the first and the last, the reference is to ourselves as Christian men and women. In the second of those verses the reference is to Christ. It is a sound principle of interpretation that whenever the same phrase occurs more than once in one context it should be taken in the same way unless there are powerful reasons to the contrary. If that is so, the first question we have to ask in order to understand how we have died to sin is how Christ died to it. How did Jesus Christ die to sin?

The first answer we are inclined to give is that he died to sin by suffering its penalty. He was punished for our sin in our place. If we carry that analogy through, we will come out near the position of Robert Haldane. We will be thinking of justification only and of our death to sin's guilt.

But I want you to notice two things. First, the reference to Jesus's death in verse 10 does not say that he died *for* sin, though he did, but that he died *to* sin—the exact thing that is said of us. That is a different idea, or at least it seems to be.

Second, Paul's statement does not say only that Christ "died to sin" but adds the very important words "once for all." The full verse reads, "The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God." This means that as far as sin is concerned, Jesus' relationship to it is finished forever. While he lived upon earth he had a relationship to it. He had come to die for sin, to put an end to its claims upon us. But now, having died, that phase of his life is past and will never be repeated. Moreover, verse 9, which leads into verse 10, says exactly that: "For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him."

We must now apply that understanding of "death to sin" to the other two instances, which refer to us. How? By realizing that, as a result of our

union with Christ in his death and resurrection, that old life of sin in Adam is past for us also. We can never go back to it. We have been brought from that old life, the end of which was death, into a new life, the end of which is righteousness. Therefore, since this is true of us, we must embrace the fact that it is true and live for righteousness.

But perhaps even this is not clear. Let me share an illustration that Stott uses:

Suppose there is a man called John Jones, an elderly Christian believer, who is looking back upon his long life. His career is divided by his conversion into two parts, the old self—John Jones before his conversion—and the new self—John Jones after his conversion. The old self and the new self (or the "old man" and the "new man") are not John Jones' two natures; they are the two halves of his life, separated by the new birth. At conversion, signified in baptism, John Jones, the old self, died through union with Christ, the penalty of his sin borne. At the same time John Jones rose again from death, a new man, to live a new life to God.

Now John Jones is every believer. We are John Jones, if we are in Christ. The way in which our old self died is that we were crucified with Christ.

[*A little further on, Stott amplifies his illustration in this way:*] Our biography is written in two volumes. Volume one is the story of the old man, the old self, of me before my conversion.
Volume two is the story of the new man, the new self, of me after I was made a new creation in
Christ. Volume one of my biography ended with the judicial death of the old self. I was a sinner. I deserved to die. I did die. I received my deserts in my Substitute with whom I have become one. Volume two of my biography opened with my resurrection. My old life having finished, a new life to God has begun.

Nowhere to Go but Forward

In the last study I asked the question: Where do we go from here? And I posed what seemed like two alternatives: Do we continue in a life of sin so that, as some might piously choose to put it, grace may increase? Or do we choose the other path, the path of God-like conduct? By now you should be able to see that there is no possible alternative to God's path, for those who are truly saved. The life of sin is what we have died to. There is no going back for us, any more than there could be a going back to suffer and die for sin again by our Lord. If there is no going back—if that possibility has been eliminated—there is no direction for us to go but forward! This is why I say that a right understanding of Romans 6:2 is the key to sanctification.

Some people try to find the key in an intense emotional experience, thinking that if only they can make themselves feel close to God they will become holy. Others try to find sanctification through a special methodology. They think that if they do certain things or follow a prescribed ritual they will be sanctified. Godliness does not come in that fashion; in fact, approaches like these are deceiving. A holy life comes from *knowing*—I stress that word—*knowing* that you can't go back, that you have died to sin and been made alive to God. Stott says, "A born-again Christian should no more think of going back to the old life than an adult to his childhood, a married man to his bachelorhood, or a discharged prisoner to his prison cell."

Can an adult still want to be a child or an infant? A happily married man a bachelor? A freed man a prisoner again? Well, I suppose some could. But no right-minded woman or man would want to.

Chapter 79.
Baptized into Jesus Christ

Romans 6:3-4

After I had first preached the sermon that constitutes the previous study, a member of the congregation at Tenth Presbyterian Church said, "That message was so important and yet so hard to understand that you ought

to preach it all over again next week." I felt that way myself, and that is what I did. However, I did it as Paul himself did it: by going on to Romans 6:3-4, which is what this study is. These two verses are a restatement of the principle for living a godly life laid down in verse 2.

I remind you of where we are. Paul has asked a question that must have been asked of him a thousand times in the course of his ministry: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" He answered by saying: "By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

The key words in this answer are "we died to sin." We saw in the last study that there have been many ways of interpreting those words: that the Christian is no longer responsive to sin; that Christians should die to sin; that the Christian is dying to sin day by day; that Christians cannot continue in sin, because they have renounced it; that the Christian has died to sin's guilt. But we saw, too, that the real meaning of the phrase is that we died to our old life when God saved us. I used John Stott's illustrations of John Jones before his conversion and John Jones after his conversion, and of volumes one and two of "our biography."

The bottom line of this discussion has been that the key to a holy life is not our experiences or emotions, however meaningful or intense these may be, but rather our *knowledge* of what has happened to us. I stressed the word *knowledge* because the most important and basic reason for going forward in the Christian life is that we cannot go back.

Knowing and Growing

When you hear this for the first time, you may think that it is just too simple or even that it is a novel (and therefore questionable) interpretation of Romans 6:2. But I would argue that it is neither novel nor questionable, and in proof of this I refer to the very next words Paul writes: "Don't you know...?" These words are the start of the question by which Paul reminds us of our identity with Jesus Christ.

Do not pass over those words lightly. Remember that Paul had never been to Rome, though he was planning to visit Rome on a proposed trip to Spain (Rom. 15:24). He had not taught the Christians in Rome

personally. Moreover, so far as we know, the church had never had the benefit of any apostolic teaching. Yet, although the Christians in Rome had never had such teaching, Paul assumes their knowledge of this doctrine by these words. In other words, what he is referring to here was common Christian knowledge. Christians have died to sin! Or, to put it in the words he is going to use next, they have been "baptized into Christ Jesus... into his death." The apostle assumes that this was known to believers everywhere, and he appeals to our knowledge of it as the key to our growth in holiness.

So I say it again: The secret of sanctification is not some neat set of experiences or emotions, however meaningful or intense they may be. It is *knowing* what has happened to you.

The Meaning of "Baptism"

What Paul says we are to know in verses 3 and 4 also supports my interpretation of verse 2. But before we plunge into that we need to think about the meaning of the word *baptism,* since it is the key term he uses.

The reason we need to do this is that for the vast majority of today's people, the mere mention of baptism immediately sets them thinking about the sacrament of water baptism and blinds them to what any text that mentions baptism may actually be saying. It has blinded commentators, too, of course. They also think of the sacrament, and because they do they have produced many wrong interpretations of these verses based on their assumption. Some have taught that the sacrament joins us to Christ and is therefore necessary for salvation. This view is called "baptismal regeneration." Some assume that Paul is thinking of our baptismal vows, others that it is a matter of coming under Christ's influence, still others that what is important is our public testimony to our faith in Christ. The last three of these actually do have something to do with water baptism. But Paul is not thinking along these lines at all in these verses, and therefore any approach to them

with the idea of the sacrament of water baptism uppermost in our minds will be misleading.

What is "baptism"? A good answer starts by recognizing that there are two closely related words for baptism in the Greek language and that they do not necessarily have the same meaning. One word is *baptō*, which means "dip" or "immerse." The other word is *baptizō*, which may mean "immerse" but may have other meanings as well. This is a normal situation with Greek words. The simpler word usually conveys the most straightforward meaning. The longer word adds specialized and sometimes metaphorical meanings.

It is the longer word that is used for "baptism" in the New Testament. So we need to ask next what the precise meaning of the longer word is.

We gain help from classical literature. The Greeks used the word *baptizō* from about 400 B.C. to about the second century after Christ, and in their literature *baptizō* always pointed to a change having taken place by some means. Josephus used it of the crowds that flooded into Jerusalem and "wrecked the city." Other examples are the dyeing of cloth and the drinking of too much wine. In each of these cases there is a liquid or something like it—the crowds were like a human "wave," a dye and wine are liquids—but the essential idea is actually that of a change. Jerusalem was wrecked. The dyed cloth changes color. The drinker becomes different; he misbehaves.

The clearest example I know that shows this meaning of *baptizō* is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles, and it is helpful because it uses both words. Nicander says that to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be "dipped" (*baptō*) into boiling water and then "baptized" (*baptizō*) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern immersing the vegetable in a solution, but the first is temporary. The second, the act of "baptizing" the vegetable, produces a permanent change.

To get this distinction in mind is of enormous help in understanding the New Testament verses that refer to baptism, including our text in

Romans, for which thoughts of a literal immersion in water would be nonsense.

Take 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, as an example. "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." That cannot be referring to a water baptism, because the only people who were immersed in water were the Egyptian soldiers, and they were drowned in it. The Israelites did not even get their feet wet. What do the verses mean? Obviously, they refer to a permanent identification of the people with Moses as a result of the Red Sea crossing. Before this they were still in Egypt and could have renounced Moses' leadership, retaining their allegiance to Pharaoh. But once they crossed the Red Sea they were joined to Moses for the duration of their desert wandering. They were not able to go back.

By now you are probably beginning to see why this discussion of baptism is important and why Paul used the words *baptized* and *baptism* in verses 3 and 4. But let me offer a few more texts that are clarified by understanding baptism as change rather than mere immersion in water.

Galatians 3:27. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." This is not referring to water baptism, because if it were, the illustration of being clothed with Christ would be inappropriate. Rather, it refers to our being identified with Christ, like a child identifies with her mother when she dresses in her mother's clothes or a soldier identifies with the armed forces of his country when he dons a uniform.

Mark 16:16 is well known. Jesus says here: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...."
Scores of people have wrongly concluded from that verse that unless a person first believes in Christ and then is also immersed in water, he or she cannot be saved. But even the poorest Bible student knows that this is not true. A person is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ

alone. If baptism in water is necessary for salvation, then the believing thief who was crucified with Christ is lost.

Once we get away from the mistaken idea that baptism always refers to water baptism, the verse becomes clear. For what Jesus is saying in Mark 16:16 is that a person needs to be identified with him to be saved. He was saying that mere intellectual assent to the doctrines of Christianity is not enough. It is necessary, to use another of his teachings, that "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). This last verse is an exact parallel to what the apostle is teaching in Romans 6:3-4, for it means that a true follower of Christ has died to his past life—like a man on his way to execution. Only, in Romans 6, the man has already died and been buried.

Buried Through Baptism

With this lengthy excursion into the meaning of the word *baptism* in mind, I return to our text to show how these ideas come together. What was the chief idea in Romans 5:12-21? It was the idea of our union with Christ, wasn't it? Before, we were in Adam; now, we are in Christ. And what is Paul's answer to "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (Rom. 6:1). It is that we have died to sin: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" Union with Christ! And death to sin!

But notice: That is exactly what baptism signifies, and in that order. The most important idea is that we have been taken out of one state and put into another. We have had an experience similar to that of the Jews after they had been brought through the Red Sea. They were joined to Moses; we are joined to Christ. Or, to put it in the words of Galatians 3:27, we have been clothed with Christ. We are in Christ's uniform. And what that means, if we look backward, is that we have died to whatever has gone before. We died to the old life when Christ transferred us to the new one.

As soon as we see how these ideas go together, we see why Paul's thoughts turned to the word *baptism* as a way of unfolding what he had

in mind when he said: "How can we live in [sin] any longer?"

I want you to notice something else, too. When theologians write about our being "baptized into
Christ" and how this is the equivalent of our being united to him by the Holy Spirit, they stress that we are identified with Christ in all respects. That is, we are identified with him in (or baptized into) his death, burial, and resurrection. One commentator got into this theme so deeply that he worked out parallels to our identification with Christ in his election, virgin birth, circumcision, physical growth, baptism by John the Baptist, suffering, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Much of this is very true, of course. If we have been identified with Christ, as we have been, we are identified with him in many respects, particularly in his death and resurrection.

But what I want to point out is that Paul does not say here that we have been identified with Christ by baptism in these other respects. He does not, for example, even say that we have been baptized into Christ's resurrection, though he goes on to say that "just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (v. 4) and later that we have been "united with him like this in his resurrection" (v. 5). In verse 3 he speaks of our baptism into Christ in one respect only: "into his death." And in the next phrase he shows that what he has particularly in mind is Christ's burial: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death."

This flow of thought is so strong that F. Godet rightly says, "According to these words, it is not to death, it is to the *internment of the dead*, that Paul compares baptism."

This is striking, and quite puzzling, too. I notice, for example, that when theologians work out the parallels of our identification with Christ, they have little trouble showing how we have been crucified with him, raised with him or even made to ascend into heaven with him. But they have trouble with the burial. "How can we be said to be buried with Christ?" they ask. "And what does this add that is not already covered by our death to sin?" Yet burial is the thing Paul emphasizes.

How do we account for this? And how do we account for the difficult way Paul puts it: "buried with him through baptism into death." More than one commentator has struggled with the awkwardness of that phrase, suggesting in some cases that it is even backward, since no one is buried into death (that is, buried to die) but rather is buried because he died.

I suggest that if this is approached as I have been suggesting, the problem is not difficult at all. The reason burial is an important step even beyond death is that burial puts the deceased person out of this world permanently. A corpse is dead to life. But there is a sense in which it can still be said to be in life, as long as it is around. When it is buried, when it is placed in the ground and covered with earth, it is removed from the sphere of this life permanently. It is gone. That is why Paul, who wanted to emphasize the finality of our being removed from the rule of sin and death to the rule of Christ, emphasizes it. He is repeating but also intensifying what he has already said about our death to sin. "You have not only died to it," he says. "You have been buried to it." To go back to sin once you have been joined to Christ is like digging up a dead body.

The Public Profession

I have been saying throughout this study that when Paul refers to our being baptized into Christ, he is not thinking chiefly of the sacrament of baptism but rather of our having been joined to Christ by the Holy Spirit. I do not want to go back on that. The very next verses prove this view, for in them Paul speaks explicitly of our being "united with him in his death [and] resurrection." This is something the Holy Spirit does.

But, while emphasizing this, I do not want to miss the significance of the sacrament of baptism as a Christian's public renunciation of his past life and a profession of his new identification with Christ.

This is not so obvious to us today perhaps, since baptism is something that generally takes place in an exclusively Christian environment and for many people means very little. But it was not so in Paul's day. And it is not so in many places in the world even today. In the ancient world, to be identified with Christ in baptism was a bold and risky declaration.

It often put the believer's life in jeopardy. There was nothing wrong with listening to Christian preaching or propaganda. But when a Christian was baptized, he was saying to the state as well as to his fellow believers that he was now a follower of Jesus Christ and that he was going to be loyal to him regardless of the outcome. It meant "Christ before Caesar."

Baptism was as nearly an irreversible step as a believer in Jesus Christ could take. Therefore, even though Paul is not thinking primarily about water baptism in Romans 6—water baptism is something we do; the baptism Paul is talking about is something that has been done to us—the sacrament of baptism is nevertheless a fit public testimony to what baptism into Christ by the Holy Spirit means: that we have been united to Christ and that the old life is done for us forever. That is what you have professed if you have been baptized, particularly if you have been baptized as an adult. You have told the world that you are not going back, that you are going forward with Jesus.

But I come to the questions that I know are in many people's minds, the same questions I touched on at the end of the last study: "But what if I do go back? What if I do sin?" Here are three points to remember:

1. *It won't work.* Do you remember my illustration of an adult trying to return to childhood. Can he do it? Well, he can act childlike, though it would be a dishonor to him and an embarrassment to everyone else. But to become a child again? It can't be done. An adult can behave in an infantile manner. But an adult cannot *be* a child. In the same way, if you are a true Christian, you cannot return to sin in the same way you were in it previously. You can sin. We do sin. But it is not the same. If nothing else, you cannot enjoy sin as you did before. And you will not even be able to do it convincingly. You will be like Peter trying to swear that he did not know Jesus, after having spent three years in Jesus' school. People will look at you and say, "But surely you are one of his disciples."
2. *God will stop you.* God will not stop you from sinning, but he will stop you from continuing in it. And he will do it in one of two

ways. Either he will make your life so miserable that you will curse the day you got into sin and beg God to get you out of it, or God will put an end to your life. Paul told the Corinthians that because they had dishonored the Lord's Supper, God had actually taken some of them home to heaven (1 Cor. 11:30). If God did it to them for that offense, he will do it to you for persistence in more sinful things.

3. *If you do return to the life you lived before coming to Christ and if you are able to continue in it, you are not saved.* In fact, it is even worse than that. If you are able to go back once you have come to Christ, it means, not only that you are not saved, but that you even have been inoculated against Christianity.

I am sure that is why the author of Hebrews wrote, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance..." (Heb. 6:4-6). Those verses are not referring to a true believer in Christ being lost—How could they in view of Paul's teaching in Romans 5 and 8?—but rather of one who was close enough to have tasted the reality of Christ and who nevertheless turned back. It teaches that the closer you are to Christ, if you do go back, the harder it will be to come to Christ again. In some cases, as in the case described here, it will be impossible.

So don't go back!

I say it again: *Don't go back!*

If you have been saved by Jesus, you have been saved forever. There is nothing before you but to go on growing in righteousness!

Chapter 80.
Living with Jesus Now

Romans 6:5-10

It is a sad fact that many people perceive Christianity as being negative. It is viewed as a series of don'ts: "Don't drink; don't play cards; don't fool around; don't laugh too loud." In fact, "Don't have fun at all," because, if you do, God will be looking down from heaven to see it and say,

"Now you cut that out!"

It is possible that some reader has taken our first studies of Romans 6 negatively, because the emphasis has been on the fact that once a person has been joined to Jesus Christ he or she can no longer go on sinning. "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Paul asked. "By no means!" he has answered. "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (vv. 1-2). That does indeed sound negative, particularly to the non-Christian. Death! And dying! If you do not know Christianity better than that, it sounds almost like "no more anything."

But that is not what real Christianity is, of course. In fact, it is just the opposite. It is sin that is negative. So to be freed from sin is to be freed to a brand new life, which is positive. Leon Morris, one of the newer and best commentators on Romans, says, "The Christian way is not negative. There is a death to an old way, it is true, but as the believer identifies with Christ in his death he enters into newness of life." The Christian way of speaking about this is to say that, for the Christian, death is followed by a resurrection.

And not just at the end of time! True Christianity is living out a new, joyful, abundant, resurrected life with Jesus Christ *now.*

A New, Rich Section

We have already had more than one hint that this has been coming. Paul ended the fifth chapter of Romans by saying that the reign of grace has replaced the reign of sin and death, and in chapter 6 he has concluded that we were "buried with him [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (v. 4). Nevertheless, it is in the

section to which we turn now (verses 5-10) that this new and abundant life is unfolded fully for the first time.

This is a long section compared to the several smaller units we have been studying in the previous chapters. In fact, it would be too long for one study if it were not that we have already dealt with most of the key terms. Most important, we have studied how we can be said to have died to sin. Jesus died to sin (not "for sin," though that is also true) by ending the phase of his life in which he was in sin's realm, and by returning to heaven. In the same way, our old relationships to sin have also ended. God fixed our future when we were taken out of Adam and joined to Christ. We cannot go back to the old life. As I have said several times, there is no place for us to go but forward.

The outline of these verses is a simple one. In verse 5, Paul states a thesis, which verses 6-10 develop. It has two parts: "If we have been united with him like this in his death..." (that is the first part; it is what he has already been talking about extensively) and "... we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (that is the second part; it is the new idea to be developed). Paul unfolds the meaning of the first part in verses 6 and 7; he explains the second part in verses 8-10.

The Body of Sin

A few lines back I wrote that the first part of verse 5 (We have been united with Christ in his death) has already been dealt with extensively, and that is true. But when Paul unfolds the meaning of this sentence in verses 6 and 7, he is not just repeating himself. This is the point at which he is starting to talk about the Christian life, particularly the Christian's sure victory over sin. Now when he mentions our union with Christ in his death, it is to show how this frees us from sin's tyranny.

The best way to show what Paul is doing in these verses is by focusing on the two key phrases.

1. *Our old self.* The first phrase is "our old self which, he says, "was crucified with" Christ. Our earlier studies have already indicated how this should be taken. "Old self refers to our old life, that is, to what we

were in Adam before God saved us. That old life is done for. We have died to it. That is why Paul says it "was (or 'has been') crucified."

Many commentators go astray at this point, because they confuse the "old self with the
Christian's "old (or 'sinful') nature," a phrase Paul uses later. Because the old nature remains with us, these teachers are always urging believers to crucify or kill the old self. They explain the persistence of sin in the believer by observing that crucifixion is a "long drawn out" process. Now it is true that the Christian life is a long-drawn-out battle with sin. That is what Romans 7 is about, as I will show when we get to it. But the secret to victory over sin is not the crucifixion or killing of the old self, for the simple reason that the old self has already died. That is why the Bible never tells us to crucify the old man. How can we if he has already been put to death?

I make this point strongly because, although the Christian life is indeed a struggle, to equate killing our old self with that struggle (when the old self has already been crucified with Christ) is to miss the truth that has been given to us by God for our victory.

2. *The body of sin.* The second key phrase is "the body of sin." It occurs in the clause "so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless [done away with]." This is the first time we have seen this phrase, though it or some variation will occur a number of times more as we proceed. What does it refer to?

Our first inclination is to think of the body of sin as being the same thing as our old self, which has just been mentioned. This is probably because the old self is said to have been crucified; a body is crucified and, if the body of sin is crucified, it is therefore obviously rendered powerless, which is what the text states. But that is not the idea. I think D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is exactly right at this point when he says that by the term "body of sin" Paul *is* talking about the old nature, and that to some extent he means the word *body* (that is, our physical body) literally. Paul was not talking about this earlier. The old self (or old man) is not the old nature. The old self is the "old me," who has died.

But here, in talking about "the body of sin," Paul *is* talking about the old nature, mentioning—for the first time in Romans—the Christian's actual inclination to sin, which must be dealt with.

That makes sense of verse 6, of course. For what Paul says in verse 6 is that God has taken us out of Adam and placed us in Christ, thereby causing us to die to the old life, in order that (1) our present inclinations to sin might be robbed of their power, and (2) we should be delivered from sin's slavery.

I want to give a personal reaction to the phrase "body of sin" at this point. If Paul were with us today and I had an opportunity to speak to him, I think I might say that I wished he had spoken of our sinful nature in some other fashion. This is because to locate the Christian's continuing inclination to sin in the "body," as this phrase does, seems to suggest two admittedly wrong ideas. First, it suggests: "I am not a sinner; it is only my body." We do not want to say that. John tells us that "if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 John 1:8). And second, it suggests that the body is somehow intrinsically evil, and we know that this is a Greek or Hindu idea, rather than a Judeo-Christian one. "Couldn't you have thought of another phrase?" I would have asked the apostle.

Yet I confess that I cannot think of a better one. And the phrase is helpful as long as I realize that, although I am not ultimately my body, I am nevertheless so much formed by it that I cannot escape its influences. The wording teaches us that in our present physical state, prior to glorification, sin is in possession of our bodies and must be dealt with at that level.

Sin in the Body

Here are some examples of how sin operates in our bodies.

We sit down to eat, and our hostess sets a beautiful spread before us. There is nothing intrinsically wrong (sinful) in either her preparations or our eating. The body is from God; it needs to eat because God made it that way. But we become so enthralled by the food's appearance and

taste that we take this natural bodily function and push it beyond where it was intended to go. We overeat. We indulge, we stuff ourselves. The overindulgence is sin, and it leads to even greater sin if it becomes a pattern. This pattern of eating harms the body and in time makes us insensitive to the needs of others—others who are hungry, for example—and to God, who has given us the food. We become ungrateful, fail to thank him, and even complain if for some reason we are unable at some future point to indulge ourselves as freely.

Take sleeping as another example. The body needs rest. We cannot do without it. Sleep or relaxation refreshes us so that we feel good. But the body can draw us into the sins of sloth and apathy and then lead us to the even more sinful conviction that others should work for us so we can be at ease. We may even think ourselves superior to these other persons since they, in our view, exist chiefly to see that we are made comfortable.

Our glands and the hormones they produce are also parts of the body. They, too, are good, since they have been given to us by God. They feed our emotions. Danger causes our adrenaline to flow so that we can react quickly to escape a life-threatening situation. Sexual hormones awaken us to the qualities of the opposite sex and lead to love, marriage, and procreation. But these same glands also react wrongly and more strongly than they should. Adrenaline will flow just because someone has offended us, and we will fight back when we should show a spirit of meekness. Our sexual glands, particularly when they are stimulated by the world's culture, lead to lust, infidelity, promiscuity, and other vices. Indeed, they turn us against God when we are told that his law forbids such inclinations.

A person may say, with reason, that it is not the body that is at fault but our minds. Sin begins in the mind or spirit. But although I realize that the source of sin is in the mind or spirit and that the spirit is not the body, it is nevertheless impossible to separate the *mind* from the body. We are as we think, and the thinking process (so far as anyone can

determine) is physiological. So even at this level it is clearly "the body of sin" from which we need to be delivered.

Posse Non Peccare

This is what our having died to sin by our union to Christ in his death is intended to accomplish. Paul says that our union with Christ in his death has been to render the body of sin powerless, so that we might "no longer be slaves to sin."

"Rendered powerless" (or "done away with"), as in the New International Version, is a better translation than the older word "destroyed" (KJV, RSV). But even this can mislead some people. The Greek word is *katargeō*, and it occurs twenty-seven times in the New Testament, including three prior instances in Romans. It occurs in Romans 3:3 and 31, where it is rendered "nullify" ("Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?" and "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith?"). It also occurs in Romans 4:14, where it is rendered "has no value" ("For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value"). Two more instances in Romans are in chapter 7, where it is translated "released" ("If her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage" [v. 2] and "We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit" [v. 6]).

None of these instances mean "destroyed," and they do not mean "rendered powerless" in the sense that the thing involved can be said no longer to exert an influence. They mean rather: "no longer to exert a controlling force or power" or "to be made ineffective."

In other words, the reason God has removed us from our union with Adam and has joined us to Christ (so that we have died to our past) is so the inclinations to sin that operate so strongly in our bodies might no longer exercise effective power or control us. They are still there, but from this point on they will not dominate us. Before this, we were "slaves to sin" (v. 6), but having died to sin, we are now "freed" from it (v. 7).

Will we sin? Yes! But we do not need to, and we will do so less and less as we go on in the Christian life. You may remember how Saint Augustine put it when he was comparing Adam's state before the fall, Adam's state after the fall, the state of those who have been saved by God through the work of Christ, and our final state in glory as Christians.

Augustine said that before he fell Adam was *posse peccare* ("able to sin"). He had not sinned yet, but he was able to.

After his fall, according to Augustine, Adam became *non posse non peccare* ("not able not to sin"). By himself he was unable to break free from it.

The state of believers, those who have been saved by Christ, is now one of *posse non peccare* ("able not to sin"). That is the state Paul is writing about in Romans 6. For them, the tyranny of sin has been broken.

The glorified state, for which we yearn, is *non posse peccare* ("not able to sin"). In our glorified state we will not be tempted by sin or be able to fall into it again.

A Present Resurrection

The second half of Paul's topical sentence in verse 5 ("we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection") is explained in verses 8-10, where Paul speaks of a present resurrection: "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God."

I have quoted those verses in full, because unless we take them together we will perceive the words "we will also live with him" as referring to our future resurrection, when actually they refer to an experience of resurrection life here and how.

Don't misunderstand. There is a future resurrection, and the same union of the believer with Christ that we have been talking about is a guarantee of it. But that is not what these verses are about. We have already seen what they mean in the case of Christ. They refer to his passage from the sphere where death reigned to the sphere of the resurrection, from where he was to where he is now. In the same way, they refer to *our* passage—from the reign of death to the reign of grace, to a present resurrection. This is what Paul says of himself in Philippians when he writes: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection..." (Phil. 3:10). He means that he wants to be victorious over sin.

I have been reading Stephen W. Hawking's stimulating book on modern physics, entitled *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking is the distinguished English physicist who has Lou Gehrig's disease and is confined to a wheelchair, but has done pioneer work in the analysis of what are commonly called "black holes" or "singularities." A black hole is a collapsed star of such density and gravity that nothing can escape from it, not even light, which is why it appears as a dark spot in the panorama of the heavens. Objects rushing toward it approach the speed of light as well as approach infinite mass; as a result, the normal laws of physics tend to lose meaning at the center. No one knows what happens when an object reaches the center, but some have speculated that for reasons beyond most people's ability to grasp, an object might shoot through the "hole" and pass into another time period or existence.

I understand a great deal less about black holes than scientists do, so I have no idea whether such speculations are true. But it occurs to me that passing through a black hole is an apt illustration of a Christian's having died to sin and having been raised to new life in Christ—if for no other reason than that he or she cannot come back. Anything that has gone through a black hole has passed through it forever. Similarly, anyone who has been united to Christ has died to sin, is on the way to God, and can never return to his or her former sphere of existence.

And there is this, too: For most of us, to pass through a black hole in space would be, in physical terms, the most important, monumental,

irreversible, and life-changing experience we can imagine. But great as that might be, it would not be so great as the change that has already taken place in those who have been lifted out of the realm of sin and joined to Jesus Christ.

When all is said and done, passing through a black hole would still mean being limited to some kind of physical universe. But being joined to Christ means being joined to the One who made the universe itself and who will still be there when heaven and earth—including black holes, quasars, neutron stars, and all the rest—have passed away.

But I do not want to leave you there. This last point is a flight of fancy, so far as I know. But what I started to talk about is the positive Christian experience of being delivered from the power of sin by the realities of Christ's life. I return to the key questions.

First: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" The answer: "By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Second, the question of this study: "How can we triumph over sin?" The answer: "By knowing what God has done for us when he joined us to Christ." We are going to look at the meaning of that even more in the next study, when we consider verse 11. But I hope you have noticed, as we studied verses 5-10, that the important word *know,* which I have called the key to this entire matter of sanctification, is here again and not only once but twice. We saw it first in verse 2: "Or don't you *know* that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Here it appears in verse 6: "For we *know* that our old self was crucified with him," and in verse 9: "For we *know* that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him."

What is true of Jesus is true of us. His relationship to sin, while he was in this life, has passed forever. It is true of us as well, since we are joined to him. The key to holiness is to know this and to press on.

Chapter 81.
You Can Count On It

Romans 6:11

I want to start this study with a brief quiz on the early chapters of Romans, and the question I want to ask is this: How many times in the letter up to this point has the apostle Paul urged his readers to do something? That is, how many exhortations have there been?

More than ten? Thirty? Less than five?

How many imperative statements occurred in chapter 1? Were there more exhortations in chapter 5 than in chapter 4?

What do you think? How many exhortations has Paul made so far?

The answer to this question is that there have been none at all! And the reason I emphasize this is to call attention to the most significant thing to be noted about Romans 6:11. This verse *is* an exhortation, and it is *the first* in the epistle. This is the first time in five and a half chapters that the apostle has urged his readers to do anything.

What are they to do? The text says: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to

God in Christ Jesus."

This is an important enough statement in itself, but it becomes even more so when we realize that Romans 6:11 is also a turning point in the letter. I mean by this that, having gotten the first olive out of the bottle, so to speak, the other exhortative olives now tumble out naturally. The next verses are full of them: "*Do not let* sin reign in your mortal body.... *Do not offer* the parts of your body to sin... but rather *offer yourselves* to God... and *offer* the parts of your body to him..." (vv. 12-14, emphasis added).

What God Has Done

Most modern Americans are activists. So we are inclined to think, as we come to this verse, that we are at last getting to what matters. But, at the risk of prolonging our discussion of the earlier chapters beyond the limits of most people's tolerance, I need to say that the point I am making— that this is *the first exhortation* in the letter—is of great practical importance.

Let me approach it this way. We live in an age of self-help books and seminars, in Christian circles as well as in the world at large, and these small books (they are usually small) and short (perhaps weekend-length) courses promise the consumer great things. The Christian versions offer formulas by which we are supposed to be able to move ahead quickly in our Christian lives. They teach us how to become great prayer warriors, perhaps even "change the world" through prayer. They show us how to relate to others successfully. They promise quick and effective methods of Bible study.

I do not want to suggest that these "quick fix" offerings are useless, of course. They are not useless. They are helpful to many, and I am sure they have their place, particularly in our fastpaced, solution-oriented culture. Still, if you have read any of these books or attended these seminars, isn't it the case that you have generally been disappointed at some level, perhaps even deeply frustrated? Perhaps you have even been frustrated enough to write off completely these methods for growing strong in the Christian faith. You have said, "I am sure they must work for other people, but not for me. They help, but not enough. Probably nothing will help me. I am probably called to be just a normal [read 'second-class'] Christian."

What is wrong here? I suggest that because of our characteristic North American impatience with matters of basic substance or with anything requiring hard and prolonged work, we have jumped ahead too quickly to the "exhortation" parts of Christianity and have not taken sufficient time to understand and appropriate the fundamental teachings. If this is so, then Paul's procedure in Romans should be of great help to us. Was Paul not interested in the spiritual growth of the Roman Christians? Of course, he was. But he knew that there was no use rushing ahead to tell

them how to live the Christian life until he had first fully instructed them on what God had done for them in Jesus Christ. This is because the work of God in Christ is foundational to everything else about Christianity.

What Paul principally wanted his readers to understand here is what theologians call the mystical union of believers with Jesus Christ. Paul's way of talking about this is to say that Christians are "in Christ," "in Jesus Christ" or "in him." Those who count such things tell us that those phrases occur 164 times in Paul's writings. One of them is in our text, and it is the first time this exact phrase has occurred in Romans. Yet it is what Paul has really been talking about for several chapters. Romans 5 dealt with it directly, contrasting our former state of being in Adam with our present state of being in Christ. In Romans 6 this has already been presented indirectly in terms of our having died to sin and having been united to Jesus in his resurrection.

This has been done for us by God. It has been his work, not ours. We have no more joined ourselves to Jesus in his resurrection than we have died for our own sins. If we are Christians, everything that is necessary has been done for us by God.

A Bookkeeping Term

What we learn in a general way, by reflecting on the amount of teaching Paul has given in chapters 1-5 of Romans, is reinforced by the verb he uses in Romans 6:11. It is the word *count* (or "reckon," as some of the other versions have it). The Greek word is *logizomai*, and it is related to the more common term *logos*, meaning "word," "deed," or "fact." In classical Greek, *logizomai* had two main uses:

1. It was used in commercial dealings in the sense of evaluating an object's worth or reckoning up a project's gain or losses. In other words, it was a bookkeeping term. We have preserved a bit of this in our English words *log, logistics,* and *logarithm.* A log refers to the numerical record of a ship's or airplane's progress. Logistics is a military term dealing with the numbers and movement of troops

or supplies. A logarithm is the exponent to which a base number is raised to produce a given number.

2. *Logizomai* was also used in philosophy in the sense of objective or nonemotional reasoning. We have preserved this meaning in our English words "logic" and "logical."

The common ground in these two uses of the word is that *logizomai* has to do with reality, with things as they truly are. In other words, it has nothing to do with wishful thinking. Nor is it an activity that makes something come to pass or happen. It is an acknowledgment of or an acting upon something that is already true or has already happened. In bookkeeping, for example, it means posting in a ledger an amount corresponding to what actually exists. If I "reckon" in my passbook that I have $100, I must really have $100. If not, "reckoning" is the wrong word for me to be using. "Deceiving myself (or others) would be more like it.

It will also help us in our understanding of Romans 6:11 to recognize that *logizomai* has already been used several times in Romans and that in every case it has referred to recognizing something that is factual. In fact, *logizomai* has appeared fourteen times before now, and it will occur again (in Romans 8 and 9). The chief use has been in chapter 4 (eleven occurrences), where Paul employed it to show how our sins have been reckoned to Christ and punished there, and how his righteousness has been reckoned ("credited") to us. These two "reckonings" are the two parallel sides of justification, and when we studied them (in volume 1) we saw that their strength comes from knowing that they concern realities. They are not just imaginary transactions. Jesus really did die for our sin; he suffered for our transgressions. Similarly, his righteousness really has been transferred to our account, so that God accounts us righteous in him.

This has bearing on Paul's exhortation to us in Romans 6:11. For although he is proceeding in this chapter to the area of what we are to do and actions we are to take, his starting point is nevertheless our counting as true what God has himself already done for us.

This is so critical that I want to ask pointedly: Do you and I really understand this? We cannot go on until we do.

Can I possibly say it more clearly?

Try this: The first step in our growth in holiness is counting as true what is, in fact, true.

And this: The key to living the Christian life lies in first knowing that God has taken us out of Adam and has joined us to Jesus Christ, that we are no longer subject to the reign of sin and death but have been transferred to the kingdom of God's abounding grace.

And this: The secret to a holy life is believing God.

The First Reality: Dead to Sin

In our text Paul says there are two things God has done that we are to count on. First, that we are *dead to sin* if we are Christians. We have already seen how this is to be taken. It does not mean that we are immune to sin or temptation. It does not mean that we will not sin. It means that we are dead to the old life and cannot go back to it.

That is the reality Paul first stated explicitly at the beginning of Romans 6, in verse 2. "We died to sin," he said. In verses 3 and 4, he restated it: We were "baptized into his death" and "buried with him through baptism into death." It was also said in verse 5: "We have been united with him in his death." Verse 6 said it, too: "Our old self was crucified with him." Verse 7 again made the point that we "died" with Christ. All those statements have been factual. They describe something that has happened.

On the basis of this truth, Paul now tells us to "count" ourselves as having died to sin in Christ Jesus. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones renders it: "Consider, and keep constantly before you, this truth about yourself." In other words, learn to think of yourself as one who has been delivered from sin's realm.

This is such a pivotal text that it is worth adding a number of things that this statement does *not* mean. Lloyd-Jones lists six of them:

1. It does not mean that it is my duty as a Christian to die to sin. The text has nothing to do with duty. It is concerned with fact.
2. It is not a command for me to die to sin. How can I be told to do what has already been done to me?
3. It does not mean that I am to reckon that sin as a force in me is dead. That would not be true. Sin *is* a force in me, though it is a force whose effective power over me has been broken (v. 6).
4. It does not mean that sin in me has been eradicated.
5. It does not mean that I am dead to sin as long as I am in the process of gaining mastery over it. That would make the statement refer to something experimental, and it does not do that. It refers to a past event.
6. It does not mean that reckoning myself dead to sin makes me dead to sin. That is backwards. What Paul is saying is that, because we *have* died to sin, we are to count on it.

The Second Reality: Alive to God

The second reality Paul says we are to count on is that we are now "alive to God in Christ Jesus." This statement completes the parallel to verse 5, in which Paul said, "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." It explains how the earlier verse is to be taken. You may remember that when we were discussing verse 5 in the previous study, I stressed that the resurrection referred to there is not the future resurrection of believers at the end of time but rather a present experience of Christ's resurrection life now. That is exactly where verse 11 has brought us. It tells us that just as we have died to sin (and must count on it), so also have we been made alive to God in Jesus Christ (and must count on that also).

This is the positive side of the matter, the side we were beginning to open up in the earlier study. But we only touched on it there. Here we can ask: "Just what does being made alive to God in Jesus Christ mean? What changes have taken place?" Let me suggest a few of them.

1. *We have been reconciled to God.* In the earlier chapters of Romans there has been a grim sequence of terms: sin, wrath, judgment, death. But God has lifted us out of that downwardspiraling sequence by a set of opposing realities: grace, obedience, righteousness, eternal life.

This means that we were subject to the wrath of God but that now, being in Christ, we are in a favorable position before him. Before, we were God's enemies. Now, we are his friends and, what is more important, he is a friend to us. There is a new relationship.

2. *We have become new creatures in Christ.* Not only is there a new relationship between ourselves and God, which is wonderful in itself, but we have also become something we were not before. In 2 Corinthians, Paul puts it like this: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ..." (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

Another way of putting this is to speak of regeneration, or of being born again, which was Jesus' term for it. He told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). This was a deliberate backward reference to the way in which God breathed life into our first parent Adam, so that he became "a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Before that, Adam was utterly inert, a lifeless form. But when God breathed some of his breath into him Adam became alive to God and all things. Likewise, this is what happens when God breathes new spiritual life into us in the work known as regeneration. We become something we were not before. We have a new life. That life is responsive to the one who gave it.

Before this, the Bible meant nothing to us when we read it or it was read in our hearing. Now the Bible is intensely alive and interesting. We

hear the voice of God in it.

Before this, we had no interest in God's people. Christians acted in ways that were foreign to us.
Their priorities were different from our own. Now they are our very best friends and co-workers. We love their company and cannot seem to get enough of it.

Before this, coming to church was boring. Now we are alive to God's presence in the service. Our worship times are the very best times of our week.

Before this, service to others and witnessing to the lost seemed strange and senseless, even repulsive. Now they are our chief delight.

What has made the difference? The difference is ourselves. God has changed us. We have become alive to him. We are new creatures.

3. *We are freed from sin's bondage.* Before we died to sin and were made alive to God, we were slaves of our sinful natures. Sin was ruining us. But even when we could see that clearly and acknowledge it, which was not very often, we were still unable to do anything about it. We said, "I've got to stop drinking; it's killing me." Or, "I am going to ruin my reputation if I don't stop these sexual indulgences." Or, "I've got to get control of my temper, or curb my spending [or whatever]." But we were unable to do it. And even if we did get some control of one important area of our lives, perhaps with the help of a good therapist or friends or a supportive family, the general downward and destructive drift was unchanged. We really were *non posse non peccare* ("not able not to sin"), as Saint Augustine described it.

But, being made alive to God, we discover that we are now freed from that destructive bondage. We still sin, but not always and not as often. And we know that we do not have to. We are now *posse non peccare* ("able not to sin"). We can achieve a real victory.

4. *We are pressing forward to a sure destiny and new goals.* Before, we were not. We were trapped by the world and by its time-bound, evil horizons. Being saved, we know that we are now destined for an eternity of fellowship and bliss with God. We have not reached it yet. We are not perfect. But we echo within what Paul said in describing his new life in Christ to the Philippians: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14).

5. *We can no longer be satisfied with this world and its offerings.* To be sure, the world never did really satisfy us. The world, which is finite, can never adequately fill beings who are made with an infinite capacity for fellowship with and enjoyment of God. But we *thought* the world and its values were satisfying. We expected to be filled.

Now we know that it will never work and that all we see about us, though it sometimes has value in a limited, earthly sense, is nevertheless passing away and will one day be completely forgotten. Our houses will be gone; our televisions will be gone; our beautiful furniture and cars and bank accounts (even our IRAs and Keoghs) will have passed away. So these tangible things no longer have any real hold on us. We have died to them, and in their place we have been made alive to God, who is intangible, invisible, and eternal, and of greater reality and substance than anything else we can imagine.

Therefore, we know ourselves to be only pilgrims here. We are passing through. Like Abraham, we are "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

"A Man Like Me"

Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. I think of Nehemiah as an illustration of what this means and of what our attitude should be. Nehemiah had determined to rebuild the wall of the ruined and abandoned city of Jerusalem, and he was being opposed by the rulers of the rival city-states around him. Two of his opponents were Sanballat of Samaria and Geshem the Arab. They invited him to a conference to be held about a day's journey from Jerusalem on the plain of Ono. This was a ploy to slow down Nehemiah's project and perhaps even to kidnap or murder him. Nehemiah refused to stop the work and go to the meeting. His words were classic: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" (Neh. 6:3).

Later when the same people tried to frighten him with rumors of a plot on his life, Nehemiah replied, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" (v. 11).

It is that courageous, self-aware attitude to life that I commend to you. "Shall I go on sinning so that grace may increase?" You should be able to answer, "How can such a one as I do it—I who have died to sin and been made alive to God in Christ Jesus?" For that is what has happened to you, if you are a Christian. You have been removed from your former state to another. Your job is to reckon it so, to count on it. You must say, "A person like me has better things to do than to keep sinning."

Chapter 82.
God's Instruments

Romans 6:12-14

During my college years I majored in English literature, concentrating on the period from Edmund Spencer to William Wordsworth, and the instruction was so good that even now, in strange moments, parts of what I learned then come back to me. This happened as I began my study of Romans 6:12-14. The words that came to mind were from *The*

Prelude. In the sixth book of that fourteen-book poem, William Wordsworth is telling of a walking tour he and a friend took from Switzerland up over the Simplon Pass into Italy. They did not know the route, got lost, descended into a ravine, and there inquired of a peasant where they could find the road to Italy. Wordsworth then wrote:

> Every word that from the peasant's lips
> Came in reply, translated by
> our feelings, Ended in this—
> *that we had crossed the Alps.*

Those words came to mind as I began this study because, in a sense, that is what has happened to us. For more than five and a half chapters we have been laboring up the majestic mountain of doctrine concerning what God has done for us in salvation. Now, for the very first time, we have passed over the highest ridge to verses that tell what we are to do in response to God's action.

To put it in other words, after many detailed studies, our tour has at last enabled us to cross from the high doctrine of justification-by-grace-through-faith to the doctrine of sanctification.

We were already easing into it in our last study, for in Romans 6:11 we encountered Paul's first exhortation to his readers in this epistle. He told them to "count" upon everything he had previously told them, to "reckon" those things so. Now he comes to four specific exhortations, prefaced by the important connecting word *therefore*. Because of what he has said, believers are to do the following: "Therefore *do not let sin reign* in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. *Do not offer* the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather *offer yourselves* to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and *offer* the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (emphases added).

Principles of Sanctification

Since this is the first direct teaching about sanctification in Romans, it is important that we understand what is being said. To do that, we need to look at this passage as a whole to see what principles about sanctification are taught here. Then we need to apply those teachings in the most practical terms possible.

We start with the principles. What are they?

1. *Sin is not dead in Christians, even in the most mature and pious Christians, but rather is something always to be struggled against.* I have already said this in a variety of ways in our previous studies, but it needs to be repeated here for two reasons. First, this principle is clear from the passage. There is no point in telling us not to offer the parts of our bodies to sin, as "instruments of wickedness," but rather to offer them to God, "as instruments of righteousness," unless we have a tendency to do the former. The reason we have to fight against sin is that we are sinners.

Second, there are some people who tend toward a kind of perfectionism in which they can claim either that sin is not in them or that the sin that *is* in them can in time somehow be eradicated. This doctrine is not only wrong (the whole of Scripture stands against it), but it is also a source of frustration for those who have come to believe in their own perfection but who nevertheless constantly find themselves fighting against sin.

2. *Sin's hold on us is in or through our bodies.* This is something we have not explored earlier

(except in reference to Rom. 6:6). But it is very important, and we need to examine it carefully. When I say that sin's hold on us is in or through our bodies, I do not mean that sin is in our bodies as opposed to being in us, as if by saying that it is in our bodies we are claiming that we are not sinners or that sin is only external to us. Of course, we are sinners, and sin is not merely external to us but rather is within. But here is the point: So far as that new man about whom Paul has been writing is concerned—that new creature I have become by being taken out of

Adam by God and by being joined to Christ—that new man is dead to sin, so that sin's hold is no longer actually on me but on my body.

Certainly we cannot miss noticing how directly, literally, and strongly Paul emphasizes our actual physical bodies in these verses. In verse 12 he refers to our "mortal body," that is, the body of our flesh that is dying. In verse 13 he twice refers to "the parts of our bodies, that is, to our hands, feet, eyes, tongues and so forth. It is through these physical parts of our bodies that sin operates and through which it maintains its strong hold on us.

3. 5m *can reign in or dominate our bodies.* It cannot dominate or destroy that new person that I have become in Christ. That new "me" will always abhor sin and yearn for righteousness—and it will have it, because God is determined to produce the holy character of Christ in his people. But sin can certainly dominate my body. I can become a slave to its cravings. If this were not so, it would be pointless for Paul to say "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires," as he does.

4. *Although sin can reign in or dominate our bodies, it does not need to.* In other words, although it is possible for us to "offer the parts of [our] body to sin, as instruments of wickedness," we do not need to do this. On the contrary, being now joined to Jesus Christ, we have his new life within and his power available to us. Having been *non posse non peccare* ("not able not to sin"), to use Saint Augustine's phrase, we have now become *posse non peccare* ("able not to sin"). We often do sin; that is why Paul is urging us not to yield our bodies to it. But we no longer need to. We have an alternative.

5. This leads to the last and positive truth: *As Christians, we can now offer the parts of our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness.* This is the thrust of the passage. It is what Paul is urging on us.

The Parts of Our Bodies

There are many ways one can approach the subject of sanctification. Paul himself does it in several ways. But I do not know a more practical, balanced, or down-to-earth way of speaking about how to live a holy life or grow in righteousness than the way in which Paul does it here. He has given us one easy-to-grasp principle in verse 11: "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Now he tells us how to give practical expression to that great principle. It is by what we do with our bodies. What does that mean? The answers come by considering the body's parts and their potential for doing both good and evil.

The Mind

We begin with the mind because, although we like to think that who we are is largely defined by our minds, and thus separate our minds from our bodies, our minds are actually parts of our bodies, so the victory we need to achieve must begin here. I take you to Romans 12:1-2, where Paul is writing much as he does in Romans 6. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by *the renewing of your mind.* Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (emphasis added).

That text begins in nearly the same way as Romans 6:12-14 ("Therefore... offer the parts of your body to him..."). But when Paul begins to spell this out, strikingly the very first body part he mentions is the mind.

Have you ever carefully thought through that what you do with your mind will determine a great deal of what you will become as a Christian? If you fill your mind with the products of our secular culture, you will remain secular and sinful. If you fill your head with trashy "pop" novels, you will begin to live like the trashy heroes and heroines whose illicit romances you read about. If you do nothing but watch television, you will begin to think like the scoundrels on "Dallas" or

"Falcon Crest" or the weekday soap operas. And you will act like them, too. On the other hand, if you feed your mind on the Bible and Christian publications, train it by godly conversation, and discipline it to critique what you see and hear elsewhere by applying biblical truths to those ideas, you will grow in godliness and become increasingly useful to God. Your mind will become an instrument for righteousness.

Some years ago, John R. W. Stott wrote a book entitled *Your Mind Matters* in which he bemoaned the growth of "mindless Christianity" and showed how a proper use of our minds is necessary for growth in all areas of our Christian experience. He related it to worship, faith, the quest for holiness, guidance, presenting the gospel to others, and exercising spiritual gifts.

He asks at one point, "Has God spoken to us, and shall we not listen to his words? Has God renewed our mind through Christ, and shall we not think with it? Is God going to judge us by his
Word, and shall we not be wise and build our house upon this rock?"

And there is something else: If Christians would offer their minds to God to be renewed by him, they would begin to think and express themselves as Christians and would begin to recover something of what Harry Blamires calls "a Christian mind." Blamires writes:

There is no longer a Christian mind. There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality. As a moral being, the modern Christian subscribes to a code other than that of the non-Christian. As a member of the Church, he undertakes obligations and observances ignored by the non-Christian. As a spiritual being, in prayer and meditation, he strives to cultivate a dimension of life unexplored by the non-Christian. But as a *thinking* being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization.... Except over a very narrow field of thinking, chiefly touching questions of strictly personal conduct, we Christians in the modern world accept, for the purpose of mental activity, a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind and a set of criteria reflecting secular evaluations.

If the use of the mind is important in sanctification, as I maintain it is, and if we lack "a Christian mind" in our day, as Blamires claims, is it any wonder that so many Christians today are for the most part indistinguishable from the non-Christians around them? Obviously, if we are going to grow in holiness, either as individuals or as a church, we must start here.

Here is a simple goal for you in this area. For every secular book you read, make it your goal also to read one good Christian book, a book that can stretch your mind spiritually.

Our Eyes and Ears

The mind is not the only part of our bodies through which we receive ideas and impressions and which must therefore be offered to God as an instrument of righteousness. We also receive impressions through our eyes and ears. These, too, must be surrendered to God.

Do you remember Achan? He was the Israelite soldier who participated in the battle of Jericho under Joshua but who disobeyed God's command not to take any of the spoils but rather to dedicate them to God. As Achan afterward confessed, "When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent with the silver underneath" (Josh. 7:21). Achan was stoned for his sin. But what caused it? The "lust of his eyes" (1 John 2:16). Achan's eyes became instruments of wickedness instead of instruments for his growth in holiness.

It is no different today. Sociologists tell us that by the age of twenty-one the average young person has been bombarded by 300,000 commercial messages, all arguing from the identical basic assumption: *personal gratification is the dominant goal in life*. Television and other modern means of communication put the acquisition of material things before godliness; in fact, they never mention godliness at all. How, then, are

you going to grow in godliness if you are constantly watching television or reading printed ads or listening to secular radio?

Do not get me wrong. I am not advocating an evangelical monasticism in which we retreat from the culture, though it is far better to retreat from it than perish in it. But somehow the secular input must be overbalanced by the spiritual.

One simple goal might be for you to spend as many hours studying your Bible, praying, and going to church as watching television.

Our Tongues

The tongue is also part of the body, and what we do with it is important. James, the Lord's brother, must have thought about this a great deal, because he says more about the tongue and its power for either good or evil than any other writer of Scripture. He wrote, "... the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6).

If your tongue is not given to God as an instrument of righteousness in his hands, what James writes will be true of you. You do not need to be a Hitler and plunge the world into armed conflict to do evil with your tongue. A little bit of gossip will do. A casual lie or slander will suffice.

What you need to do is use your tongue to praise and serve God. For one thing, you should learn how to recite Scripture with it. You probably can repeat many popular song lyrics. Can you not also use your tongue to speak God's words? How about worship? You should use your tongue to praise God by means of hymns and other Christian songs. Above all, you should use your tongue to witness to others about the person and work of Christ. That is the task Jesus gave you when he said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

Here is another goal for you if you want to grow in godliness: Use your tongue as much to tell others about Jesus as for idle conversation.

Our Hands and Feet

Our hands and feet determine what we do and where we go. So when we are considering how we might offer the parts of our body to God as instruments of righteousness, let us not forget them.

I think of several important passages in this regard. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul writes of using our hands profitably so we might be self-supporting and not dependent on anybody: "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." Similarly, in Ephesians 4:28, Paul writes of working so that we will have something to give to others who are needy: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."

And what of our feet? A few chapters further on in Romans, Paul writes of the need that others have for the gospel: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Rom. 10:14-15).

Where do *your* feet take you?

Do you allow them to take you to where Christ is denied or blasphemed? Do they take you to places where sin is openly practiced? Are you spending most of your time soaking up the world's entertainment or loitering in bars or the "hot" singles clubs? You will not grow in godliness there. On the contrary, you will fall from righteous conduct. Instead, let your feet carry you into the company of those who love and serve the Lord. Or, when you go into the world, let

it be for the purpose of serving the world and witnessing to its people in Christ's name.

Here is another goal: For every special secular function you attend, determine to attend a Christian function also. And when you go to a secular function, do so as a witness by word and action for the Lord Jesus Christ.

A Warfare and a Race

What we are actually engaged in is spiritual warfare, an ongoing battle against sin, for our own growth in grace and for the good of others. And, like all soldiers who are facing some great conflict, we are to train ourselves physically and steel our wills for the enterprise.

Paul thought in these terms, sometimes speaking of a warfare in which the followers of Christ are to clothe themselves with God's armor (cf. Eph. 6:10-18), sometimes speaking of a race. "Fight the good fight of the faith..." he says in 1 Timothy 6:12. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith," he says in 2 Timothy 4:7.

I like the way Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Perhaps you have seen the recent television advertisement for a certain brand of athletic shoe in which six or seven very energetic young people are going through their workouts. The scenes shift quickly and the tempo increases rapidly throughout the commercial until it all suddenly comes to an abrupt halt and three words appear on the screen in bold black letters: "Just do it."

That is what I recommend to you. You have been waiting through five and a half chapters of Romans for something to do. Now you have that something. You know what it is. So do it. Just do it. "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of righteousness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness."

Why should you do this? Why should you submit to such rigorous training? It is not because you are driven to do it. It is because you have been liberated from sin by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and want to do it. You want to live for him. This is why Paul ends by saying, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (v. 14).

Chapter 83.
Whose Slave Are You?

Romans 6:15-18

The point of this next study is difficult for most people to accept, so I want to state it simply at the beginning and allow the rest of the chapter to expound and defend it. The point is this: *There is no such thing as absolute freedom for anyone.* No human is free to do everything he or she may want to do. There is one being in the universe who *is totally* free, of course. That is God. But all others are limited by or enslaved by someone or something. As a result, the only meaningful question in this area is: Who or what are you serving?

Ray C. Stedman, pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, tells of walking down the street in Los Angeles one day and seeing a man coming toward him with a sign hung over his shoulders. The sign read: "I am a slave for Christ." After the man had passed him, Stedman turned around to look after this rather eccentric individual and saw that on his back there was another sign that said: "Whose slave are you?"

That is exactly the point of this passage. Since you and I are human beings and not God, we can never be autonomous. We must either be slaves to sin or slaves of Jesus Christ.

But here is the wonderful and very striking thing: *To be a slave of Jesus Christ is true freedom.*

The Chapter's Second Half

All this flows from our study of Romans 6, but we need to back up a bit to find our place in Paul's argument.

The verses we are considering here are verses 15-18, the start of a longer section that extends to the end of the chapter. A glance at this section shows that it is parallel to the first half of the chapter, that is, to verses 1-14. Each section deals with a nearly identical question. The first verse of section one asks, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" The first verse of section two raises the same issue: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (v. 15).

These questions are followed by identical responses: "By no means!" (vv. 2, 15). From this point on, the two sections follow parallel tracks as Paul explains why it is impossible for the believer in Christ to continue in sin and why, by contrast, Christians must yield the parts of their bodies to God as instruments of righteousness. These arguments are so close to one another that it is possible to lift terms from one section and transfer them to the other without any real change in meaning.

Yet the two halves of Romans 6 are not identical. They have the same objective—to show that the believer in Christ cannot go on sinning. But they make this important point in different, though complementary, ways.

The first section comes out of the discussion in chapter 5, in which Paul argued that the Christian is not under law but is under grace and that grace will triumph. He shows that grace does not lead to sin, the reason being that we have been joined to Christ. If we have been joined to

Christ, the past is behind and there is no place for us to go in life but forward in righteous conduct. The second section comes out of the discussion in Romans 6:1-14, particularly verse 14, in which Paul rejects law as a vehicle of righteousness. He argues that freedom from law does not lead to sin either. The reason he gives is that we have been freed from law, not to become autonomous creatures (which we cannot be on any account), but to be slaves of God. We must be slaves to righteousness.

Two Errors

Paul was answering objections to the doctrine of salvation by grace that were coming from two sides, just as they come to us today.

On one side were Jewish traditionalists with a commitment to the law of Moses. They argued that if law is rejected as a way of salvation, which Paul obviously was doing, immorality and all other vices inevitably follow. Paul shows that it does not work that way. In fact, he shows the opposite. He shows:

1. The law does not lead to righteousness, for the simple reason that it is unable to produce righteousness in anyone. The law can only condemn.
2. Paradoxically, it is only by being delivered from the law and its condemnation, through union with Jesus Christ, that we are empowered to do what the law requires.

The other objection came not from Jewish legalists, but from people we call Antinomians, those who reject the law not only as a way of salvation but even as an expression of proper conduct. Antinomianism says, "Since we are free from law, we can do anything we please. We are free to go on sinning. In fact, we can wallow in it."

Paul answers both of these errors in this chapter of Romans.

Five Sound Reasons

"Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" The answer, as we already know by now, is: "By no means!" "Why not?" we ask. In this section Paul gives five sound reasons.

1. *Sin is slavery.* The first reason Christians must not sin, even though they are not under law but under grace, is that sin is actually slavery, and it would be folly to be delivered from slavery only to return to it again. The difficulty here is that sin is rarely seen by us in this way, that is, in its true colors. Instead of being presented as slavery, it is usually described as the very essence of freedom. This was what the devil told Eve in the Garden of Eden when he argued, "Don't be bound by God's word. Be free. Eat of the tree and become as God, knowing good and evil."

Years ago, before the current thaw in Sino-American relations, some Christians in Hong Kong had an interview with an eighty-two-year-old woman who had come out of China just a short while before. She was a believer in Christ, but her vocabulary was filled with the terminology of communism, which was all she had been hearing for decades. One of her favorite expressions was "the liberation."

The interviewers asked her, "When you were back in China, were you free to gather together with other Christians to worship?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "Since the liberation, no one is permitted to gather together for Christian services."

"But surely you were able to get together in small groups to discuss the Christian faith," they continued.

"No," she said. "We were not. Since the liberation, all such meetings are forbidden."

"Were you free to read your Bible?"

"Since the liberation, no one is free to read the Bible."

The conversation shows that "freedom" is not in the word but in the reality. Remember that, the next time someone suggests that you have to

sin to be free. Merely attaching the word *freedom* to sin does not make sin a way of liberation. The truth is that sin is bondage. It enslaves us so that we are unable to escape its grasp later, even if we want to. If you give way to sensual passions, you will become a slave to those passions. If you give way to greed, you will become a slave to greed. So also for every other vice and wrongdoing.

2. *Sin leads to death.* The second reason we must not sin, even though we are not under law but under grace, is that sin leads to death. Paul says this several times in these verses: "sin, which leads to death" (v. 16), "Those things result in death!" (v. 21), and "For the wages of sin is death" (v. 23).

Again, this is not what we are usually told. It is not what the devil told Eve either. God had said, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). The devil countered, "You will not surely die.... For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5).

Here was a true crisis for the woman. God said, "You will die." The devil said, "You will not surely die." Who was right? Who was she to believe?

The woman decided to resolve the dilemma for herself. She examined the tree and saw that it was "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" (Gen. 3:6). She concluded, "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" So she took some of the fruit, ate it, and then gave some to Adam, who also ate of it.

What happened? They died! They died in their spirits instantly, for the fellowship they had enjoyed with God up to this point was broken, which they showed by hiding from God when he came to them later in the garden. Their personalities began to decay, for they started to lie and shift the blame to one another. At last their bodies also died, as God said: "... dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen. 3:19).

The only bright spot was that God also graciously promised a Redeemer who would save them from their sin.

Do not listen to those who tell you that sin is harmless. Above all, do not trust your own judgment in these matters. You are not able to judge in such situations. You must trust God, who tells you that to sin is to die. In fact, being a sinner, you are already dying. Your moral life is decaying. Your body is inclining to the grave. One day you will experience the second death, which is to be separated from God in hell forever—unless God saves you first. The only sensible reaction to sin is to turn from it and seek salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. *Christians have been delivered from sin's slavery.* The third reason Christians are not to continue in sin, even though they are not under law but under grace, is that they have been delivered by Jesus from sin's tyranny if they truly are Christians. This is so wonderful that Paul actually breaks into a doxology or "praise to God" at this point, saying, "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin... you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (vv. 17-18).

This is the meaning of what former Princeton Seminary professor B. B. Warfield called the most "precious" terms in the Christian's vocabulary: "Redeemer" and "redemption." Redemption means to buy out of slavery to sin. This was accomplished for us by Jesus, who is our Redeemer. We were slaves to sin, that cruel taskmaster. But Jesus paid the price of our redemption by his death. He purchased us with his blood: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

This is the very purpose of the atonement. How, then, can those who have been redeemed return to sinful living? To do so would be to repudiate Christ, to turn from everything he stands for. It would be apostasy. No true Christian can do it.

4. *The same work that has delivered Christians from sin's slavery has also made them slaves of God, which is true freedom.* The fourth of Paul's arguments for why Christians cannot continue in sin, even though they are not under law but under grace, is that the same act of Christ that has delivered us from sin has also made us "slaves of God" (v. 22). By his act of redemption, Jesus has purchased men and women for himself, that is, to serve him.

"Ah," says someone. "What gain is that? What advantage is it to be freed from one master if all it means is that we become slaves of another?"

Well, it would be a significant gain even if we were slaves in a physical sense and were set free from a cruel master to become a slave to one who was kind and had our best interests at heart. That would be a welcome change, and it is part of the picture, for God is as good, kind, and loving a master as sin is cruel and harmful. But there is more to it than that. The Bible teaches that this "slavery" actually brings freedom.

What is this freedom? It is not autonomy, a license to do absolutely anything at all. True freedom is "the ability to fulfill one's destiny, to function in terms of one's ultimate goal." Real freedom means doing what is right.

Do you remember the conversation the Lord Jesus Christ had with the Jewish religious leaders of his day, as recorded in John's Gospel? Jesus had been speaking about the source of his teachings, and some of the Jews had believed on him in a rudimentary way. So he encouraged them to remain with him and continue to learn from him, saying, "If you hold to my teaching [that is, continue in it], you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

This infuriated some of his listeners, presumably those who were not true believers, because they did not like the suggestion that they were not free—just as many resent any similar suggestion today. They replied, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" (v. 33). This was a

ridiculous answer, of course. The Jews had been slaves to the Egyptians for many years prior to the exodus. During the period of the judges there were at least seven occasions when the nation came under the rule of foreigners. There was also the seventy-year-long Babylonian captivity. In fact, even while they were talking to Jesus they were being watched over by occupying Roman soldiers, and they were carrying coins in their pockets that testified to Rome's domination of their economy. It was this latter fact that probably made them so sensitive to the suggestion that they were not truly free.

But instead of reminding them of these obvious facts, Jesus answered on a spiritual level, saying, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (vv. 34, 36).

What kind of freedom was Jesus talking about? True freedom, of course, the only real freedom there is. It is not liberty to do just anything at all. If we choose sin, the result is bondage. True freedom comes through knowing the gospel and being committed to the Lord Jesus Christ in his service.

Can I put this sharply? The only real freedom you are ever going to know, either in this life or in the life to come, is the freedom of serving Jesus Christ. And this means a life of righteousness. Anything else is really slavery, regardless of what the world may promise you through its lies and false teaching.

5. *The end of this second, desirable slavery is righteousness.* This leads to Paul's last point, the fifth reason why Christians must not continue in sin, even though they have been freed from law and are under grace. It is that the end of this second, desirable slavery to God and Jesus Christ is righteousness. True Christianity can never lead to license, the accusation refuted by Paul in this passage. Since it is liberation from sin in order to become a servant of God and of Jesus Christ, Christianity must inevitably lead to what God desires, which is righteousness.

The Obedience of Faith

I close this study by asking you to look at one more word: *obedience.* It occurs in verse 16 in the phrase "slaves... to obedience," and it is amplified by the verb *obey,* which occurs three times more in these verses (once in verse 16, and twice in verse 17). This is an important idea.

It is puzzling, too, at least at first glance.

Why? Because in verse 16 it occurs as the opposite of sin ("slaves to *sin*... or to *obedience*"), which does not seem exactly right to us. Instead of "obedience" we would expect the word *righteousness.* Then, in verse 17, it occurs where we would normally expect the idea of "faith" ("you wholeheartedly *obeyed* the form of teaching to which you were entrusted"). We would more naturally say, "You wholeheartedly *believed* the gospel."

One reason why Paul uses the word *obedience* is that it carries through the image he has been developing, namely that of being a slave either to sin or of Jesus Christ. It is the function of a slave to obey his or her master. But the use of the term goes beyond this, since obedience is an essential requirement of all who would follow Christ. And not just afterward, as if we are called first to believe and then to obey. Obedience is the very essence of believing. It is what belief is all about.

When I am teaching about faith I usually say that faith has three elements: (1) an intellectual element (we must believe in something; this is the gospel); (2) an emotional element (the content of that gospel must touch us personally); and (3) commitment (we must give ourselves to Jesus in personal and often costly discipleship). It is in this last area that obedience is so critical. For, if obedience is not present, we have not committed ourselves to Christ, even though we may believe in him in some sense. And without that commitment we are not saved; we are not true Christians.

Have you ever considered how important obedience is in the Bible's treatment of its chief characters? I will cite two examples.

The first is Joshua. Obedience was the chief characteristic of this very great man's life, for at the beginning of his story he was challenged to obey God in all things—"Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go" (Josh. 1:7b)—and this is precisely what he did, to the very end. His whole life was marked by obedience.

The other example is Abraham, who was such a giant of faith that he is praised for his faith four times in Hebrews 11. His faith was so great that when God promised him a son in his old age, though he was past the age of engendering a child and his wife Sarah was past the age of conceiving one, Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:20-21).

But even this was not the highest achievement of Abraham's faith. It is not the act for which he is chiefly praised in Hebrews.

The high point of Abraham's long life of faith was reached when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Abraham showed an incredible faith here, believing that if God told him to sacrifice his son and if his son had not yet had the children God had promised he would have, then God would have to raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfill his promise (cf. Heb. 11:19). But, in Genesis, where the story is told, the quality for which Abraham is praised by God is not faith but obedience: "Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, *because you have obeyed me*" (Gen. 22:15-18, emphasis added).

There is no escaping it! Either we obey sin, which leads to death, and are enslaved by it, or we have been freed from sin to serve God. If we have been freed from sin, we will serve God. There is just no other option.

Chapter 84.
The Bottom Line

Romans 6:19-22

We are coming to the end of Romans 6 and therefore to the end of a very important Bible chapter dealing with the Christian life. Strangely, the chapter is something of a parenthesis, as I pointed out when we began to study it—just as the following chapter, Romans 7, is also a parenthesis.

Paul had been talking about the permanent nature of salvation. This was his theme in chapter 5, and it is the dominant note of the magnificent eighth chapter that is still to come. Between these two chapters he has been exploring the errors of people who would say, on the one hand, "If salvation by the grace of God in Jesus Christ is a sure thing—if it cannot be lost—why should we not go on living a life of sin? We will be saved anyway" and, on the other hand, "If we are saved by the grace of God apart from the Old Testament law, why shouldn't we be lawless?" In the verses immediately preceding the ones we will study here, the apostle has answered the first question by showing that being a Christian means being delivered from a slavery to sin so that we might become willing slaves of God, which is true freedom. We cannot go on serving the old master.

This means that "being a Christian" and "not being a Christian" are two mutually exclusive categories. Therefore, once we have passed from our former unbelieving state and become a Christian, we have no choice but to go forward in the Christian life, which means serving God in holiness.

John R. W. Stott puts it like this:

Here then are two completely different lives, lives totally opposed to one another—the life of the old self, and the life of the new. They are what Jesus termed the broad road that leads to destruction, and the narrow road that leads to life. Paul calls them two slaveries. By birth we are slaves of sin; by grace and faith we have become slaves of God. The slavery of sin yields no return, except a steady, moral deterioration and finally death. The slavery of God yields the precious return of sanctification and finally eternal life. The argument of this section, then, is that our conversion—this act of yielding or surrender to God—leads to a status of slavery, and slavery involves obedience.

Whom Will You Serve?

Paul has been using the analogy of slavery to make his point, a fact he alludes to in verse 19, saying, "I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves." And the point has been that in life we must serve either of two masters. Either we must serve sin, or we must serve God. There is no neutral ground.

This is Paul's main point. But do we really believe this? If we understood it and really believed it, would we sin as frequently or as easily as we sometimes do? Would we take sin lightly and be as casual in the pursuit of righteousness as we often are?

The Doctrine of the Two Ways

What Paul has been describing in these verses is the doctrine of the two ways, which is found throughout the Bible.

The best-known statement of it is in the words of Jesus recorded in the Sermon on the Mount.
The last section of that sermon lists a series of contrasts among which choices must be made: two gates and two roads, two trees and their two types of fruit, two houses and two foundations. The part regarding the two ways says, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). The point is that a person can be on only one of these two roads, because the roads are entirely different and lead in opposite directions.

The classic statement of the doctrine is in Psalm 1, which contains the very points Paul makes in Romans 6. It describes two different categories of people: "the wicked" and "the righteous."

The psalm shows the progression within each of these two categories. On the one hand, there is progression in wickedness. Those in the first category begin by "walk[ing] in the counsel of the wicked," then "stand in the way of sinners" and finally "sit in the seat of mockers" (v. 1). In other words, they become increasingly settled in ungodliness by their practice of it. Moreover, their lives bear no fruit. They are barren plants, "like chaff that the wind blows away" (v. 4). On the other hand, there is progression in godliness. The righteous man's "delight is in the law of the LORD," and he produces lasting fruit; he is like a "tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers" (vv. 2-3).

Finally, the psalm gives the ends of the two types of people: "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous" (v. 5), that is, the company of the righteous in heaven. "For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (v. 6). The end of the righteous is eternal life. The end of the wicked is judgment.

It should be evident that this is exactly what Paul is saying in these verses, though his slavery analogy does not speak of scoundrels collecting by the gates of the city or the scattering of useless chaff at harvest time. Nor does he refer to the "slaves to God" as fruitful trees. But he does describe two different pathways.

The first path starts with slavery to sin. It is the condition into which each of us is born, for none of us is born righteous. Sin is our cruel

master; it drives us along. By ourselves we are unable to escape this harsh tyranny.

This leads to "impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness" (v. 19). Impurity refers to sin as it affects the individual. It means personal defilement, particularly by sins that are opposed to chastity. Wickedness refers to violation of the divine or human laws. Robert Haldane says that the former "refers principally to the pollution, the other to the guilt of sin." Moreover, this wickedness is progressive! The Greek text is particularly suggestive at this point, for it literally reads "you have yielded your members slaves... *to wickedness unto wickedness."* In other words, sin is a downhill path, as Paul has already shown in Romans 1. Those who begin by walking in the counsel of the wicked soon find themselves standing in the way of sinners and eventually sitting in the seat of mockers.

The end of this destructive path is death, which Paul mentions three times in this section (vv. 16, 21, 23). This does not mean physical death, since the righteous as well as the wicked experience physical death. It means the full penalty of sin, which is eternal punishment.

The second path starts with slavery to God, which God accomplishes in us and which is actually freedom. This path leads to "righteousness," and righteousness leads to "holiness" (v. 19). These words parallel the principle that "impurity" leads to "ever-increasing wickedness" and describe the contrary experience of one who has been claimed by God. "Righteousness" in this context means primarily righteous acts. "Holiness" is an inner state characterized by conformity to the will and character of God. The phrase "righteousness leading to holiness" teaches that the practice of outward godliness leads to inward godliness; that is, doing right things actually brings a person along the pathway of spiritual growth.

The end of this healthy, developing path is eternal life (v. 22). In this context "eternal life" refers to the fruit, or end result, of a godly life, not the life itself or its reward. It refers to eternal fellowship with God, who is its source.

Just Do It!

The point of Paul's analysis is to exhort Christians to live holy lives, though the application is made at the beginning of the paragraph rather than at the end: "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer the parts of your body in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (v. 19b).

What more can be said about this application?

The first thing we notice is that it is an almost identical exhortation to the one found in verse 13 in the first half of the chapter. At that point Paul had already shown that the one who has become a Christian has died to sin and been made alive to God in Christ. His argument was that, because this is so, it is for us to recognize this change and act on it: "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ." How are we to do that? What does it mean to count ourselves dead to sin but alive in Christ? The answer was: "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (v. 13).

Notice that this is precisely what Paul says all over again in verse 19. He refers to the parts of our bodies and contrasts our former offering of them to sin with our present offering of them to righteousness. The only noticeable difference is that in verse 19 he speaks about *slavery* to sin versus *slavery* to righteousness, which fits in with the new analogy he is unfolding.

Why does Paul repeat himself like this? Obviously to make the point that there is just no other way for us to grow in righteousness. There is no secret formula for holiness, no magic recipe.

The only means is to realize what God has done for us and then discipline the parts of our bodies—our minds, eyes, ears, tongues, hands, and feet—to act accordingly.

I cannot emphasize this point enough, because we live in a day in which Christian people are shirking hard work and are searching (if they even bother to search) for some easy solution or quick fix. We look for quick solutions in our physical and emotional lives on a regular basis. If we are depressed, we take in a movie, go shopping, or pop a pill. If we are having trouble with a personal relationship, we go to a weekend seminar to pick up pointers—or to a singles bar to pick up some new person.

We Christians find it easy to carry this outlook into our spiritual lives. Some who do this look for a special "victory" formula ("let go and let God," "take it by faith," or some other handy slogan). Some search for a powerful emotional experience. Still others pray for miracles.

But these are not God's answers. God is not withholding something from us, some secret we need to seek or for which we should pray. God has already done everything necessary for our salvation and given us everything we need to live a consistent Christian life. So, if we fail to do it, it is either because we have not been taught what God has done and therefore do not know how to conduct ourselves as Christians, or we are just too sinful or lazy.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, "You have already received 'all things that pertain unto a life of godliness.' You do not need another experience. You do not need some new gift. You have been given everything in Christ; you are 'in him' from the beginning of your Christian life. You are just a slacker and a cad, just lazy and indolent, indeed 'a liar,' if you are not living this life." He says that this is the New Testament way of preaching holiness and sanctification, and he is right.

Our Reasonable Service

What is the bottom line? Lloyd-Jones spells it out in the six propositions.

1. *The teaching about sanctification in verse 19, like the teaching in verses 11-13, is an exhortation.* In fact, it is a command. Before

our conversion we were under the control of sin, and sin commanded us to give the parts of our body to it for wicked acts. We obeyed sin in those days; we had to. Now we have passed under the command of God, and God commands us to offer our bodies to him for acts of righteousness.

2. *Being an exhortation, the command to offer our bodies to God for his purposes is something we must do.* Indeed, it is something we can do. If this command had been laid upon us prior to our conversion, we would not have been able to do it. We would have been *non posse non peccare* ("not able not to sin"), as Augustine said. But being freed from bondage to sin and having been made willing slaves of God by the new birth, we are now *posse non pecare* ("able not to sin"). To put it in positive terms, we are now able to obey God, do good works, and live righteous lives.

3. *The command to yield the parts of our bodies as instruments of righteousness is based on something that has already happened to us.* That is, something that has *already* happened, not something that may happen or will yet happen to us.

Here is an exercise for you. Go through Romans 6 and underline the verbs that tell, in a past tense, what has happened to those of us who are Christians. You will find that you are underlining nearly every significant verb: "we *died* to sin" (v. 2); "all of us... *were baptized* into Christ Jesus... into his death" (v. 3); "we *were therefore buried* with him" (v. 4); "we *have been united* with him like this in his death" (v. 5); "our old self *was crucified* with him" (v. 6); "we *died* with Christ" (v. 8); "you wholeheartedly *obeyed* the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (v. 17); "you *have been set free* from sin and *have become* slaves to righteousness" (v. 18); "you *have been set free* from sin and *have become* slaves to God" (v. 22). These verbs describe the experience of all who are truly Christians. It is because their experience can be described in these terms, because of what has *already* happened, that a life of holiness through the power of God is possible for them.

4. *The New Testament approach to sanctification is therefore to get us to realize our position and act accordingly.* The New Testament does not tell us to be what we will become. Rather, it tells us to be what we are. Lloyd-Jones says, "I cannot find anywhere in the New Testament, teaching which says, 'Christ has been crucified for you; what remains now is that you should be crucified with Christ.' That has been popular teaching; but it is not in the New Testament. Every man who is a Christian has already been crucified with Christ.... It is because that has already happened, it is because that is true of us, that this command... is addressed to us."

5. *This demand is utterly reasonable.* In fact, anything contrary to it is unreasonable. Before we were saved, we served sin; that was consistent and reasonable. But now that we are converted, it is equally reasonable that we should serve God.

Do you understand that Paul is reasoning with us here? A moment ago I said to look at Romans 6 for verbs that tell what has happened to us in our salvation. Now go back and look at it again, noting the deductions Paul draws from those actions: "We died to sin, *how can we* live in it any longer?" (v. 2); "If we have been united with him like this in his death, *we will certainly also* be united with him in his resurrection" (v. 5); "*Therefore* do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (v. 12); "For sin shall not be your master, *because you are not under law,* but under grace" (v. 14); *"What then? Shall we sin* because we are not under law but under grace? *By no means!"* (v. 15); *"Just as* you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, *so now* offer them in slavery to righteousness..." (v. 19b).

The Bible says that if you are living a sinful life, your conduct is inconsistent with any Christian profession you might have made. If you claim to be a Christian, you must therefore straighten your life out, or you dare not long assume you are a true believer. That would be presumptuous! God forbid that any of us should continue sinning, thinking that grace will abound.

6. *The failures we have in trying to live a holy life are due almost entirely to our failure to realize these truths or to our laziness or sin in failing to apply them to our conduct.* Do you remember Jesus' words about sanctification? He said in his prayer for his disciples: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). This is identical doctrine to what we have in Paul's writings. It is truth for today.

Not long ago I was rereading an essay by C. S. Lewis called "The Weight of Glory." As he ends this essay, Lewis urges us to think of people as eternal creatures who are daily becoming either more and more like God or more and more like the devil. He writes:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

Lewis says that we would treat others better if we would learn to think of them in those terms. But if that is true of others, it is also obviously true of ourselves. What we do now has bearing on what we will one day be. And it works the other way, too. What we will be must determine what we do now. If we have been saved by Jesus and are going to be like Jesus, we must start living like him and for him, day by day.

Chapter 85.
Sin's Wages and God's Gift

Romans 6:23

Scattered throughout the Bible are verses that even the most casual reader at once perceives to be extraordinarily important. It is not that the other verses are unimportant, for "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful..." (2 Tim. 3:16). But certain texts stand out above others as striking summaries of very important doctrines, particularly those that lie at the very heart of the gospel.

Romans 6:23 is one such verse. It says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. For one thing, it appears in Romans, a particularly well-known book. But it is also short and easy to memorize. There are only twenty words here (nineteen in Greek); only three of these have more than one syllable, and they are certainly not difficult: "wages," "eternal," and "Jesus." Romans 6:23 has been taught to millions of Sunday school children and has been incorporated into gospel presentations in scores of tracts, booklets, and studies. In many of these presentations the text comes immediately after Romans 3:23 ("for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God") and before the best-known verse of all: John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life").

Charles Haddon Spurgeon called Romans 6:23 "a Christian proverb, a golden sentence, a divine statement of truth worthy to be written across the sky." He wrote, "As Jesus said of the woman who anointed him for his burial, 'Wherever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her'; so I may say, 'Wherever the gospel is preached, there shall this golden sentence, which the apostle has let fall, be repeated as proof of his clearness in the faith.' Here you have both the essence of the gospel and a statement of that misery from which the gospel delivers all who believe."

Paul seems to have loved using short, expressive statements, no doubt because they were so useful in his front-line missionary teaching.

The Two Ways

The appeal of this verse is in its summary of the doctrine of the two ways, which we were officially introduced to in the last study but have been studying in one way or another throughout this entire chapter and even in Romans 5. This doctrine has been presented repeatedly, though in different formats.

In Romans 5 it was expressed as the distinction between being in Adam and being in Christ. The two ways were traced from the contrary actions of the two federal heads of mankind. Adam, we were told, disobeyed God; his disobedience brought condemnation and death to his posterity. Jesus obeyed God; his obedience resulted in justification and life for those who are joined to him. Toward the end of the chapter the contrast was described as being between the law and grace. Law worked sin, and the result of sin was death. Grace results in righteousness and eternal life.

In Romans 6 the case is similar, only here the two ways have been described as outworkings of two slaveries. On the one hand, there is a slavery to sin. Each of us is born into this slavery, which leads to "impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness" (v. 19). The end is death (v. 21). On the other hand, there is a slavery to God, which leads to "righteousness leading to holiness" (v. 19) and ends in life (v. 22).

This is what is summarized in our text. It is what Paul means when he says that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Way of Death

When the apostle contrasts "death" with "eternal life," as he does in this text, we immediately think of the state of souls beyond the grave. That is, we think of eternal life as the life of God's children in heaven and of eternal death (in Revelation it is called a "second death") as the death, accompanied by punishment, of those who die apart from Jesus Christ. That is part of the picture, of course, an important part. But we need to remember that, in Romans 6, Paul is writing about the *present* life of the

believer and stressing that, having been freed from slavery to sin, a Christian must thereafter *live* to serve God.

Although these are eternal ends—death and life—we must not overlook that there is also a present death and a present life to be considered.

I would go even further than this to say that in this verse Paul is particularly concerned with the effects of sin and righteousness in *this* life and not with the life to come. My reason for thinking this is that he uses the word *opsōnia* ("wages") to describe sin's effects. This word was used of the daily food ration (literally, "fish ration") given to a Roman soldier for his service. In other words, it does not refer to a large payment dispensed at the end of the soldier's period of service but rather to something that was measured out to him day by day. It is the individual's present state, then, not his future state, that is in view.

In other words, we have a parallel in this verse to what we have already seen in Romans 1 regarding the "wrath" of God. To our minds, "wrath" also suggests something occurring at the end of time: God's final judgment on sin to be meted out at the last day. That is certainly one aspect of it. But what Paul is actually talking about in Romans 1 is the *present* outworking of God's wrath against men and women, as seen in the downward life-path of those who have rejected him.

This is extremely relevant.

Not long ago I was reading the classic study of sin, originally published in 1973 by Karl
Menninger of the famous Menninger Clinic of Topeka, Kansas. It is called *Whatever Became of Sin?* Menninger is a psychiatrist, and what had disturbed him and caused him to write this book was an awareness, based on his careful observation and counseling, that as a concept "sin" has all but disappeared from our national consciousness—with disastrous results.

What is sin? Menninger defines it in classical language: "Sin is transgression of the law of God; disobedience of the divine will; moral failure. Sin is failure to realize in conduct and character the moral ideal,

at least as fully as possible under existing circumstances; failure to do as one ought towards one's fellow man."

What became of sin? Briefly put, "sin" first became "crime" (transgression of the law of man rather than transgression of the law of God), and then "crime" became "symptoms." Symptoms were caused by factors thought to be external to the offender and therefore things for which he or she was clearly not responsible.

Menninger refers to what happened by a satire about psychiatry written and sung by Anna Russell.

> At three I had a feeling of
> Ambivalence toward my brothers.
> And so it follows naturally I poisoned all my lovers.
> But now I'm happy; I have learned
> The lesson this has taught:
> *That everything I do that's wrong Is someone else's fault.*

"Can we have moral health without responsibility?" asks Menninger. "Or mental health without moral health?" He suggests that psychiatrists may actually have compounded the problem by "neglecting the availability of help for some individuals whose sins are greater than their symptoms and whose burdens are greater than they can bear."

But that is not the reason I refer to Menninger, though this background is necessary for understanding why I quote him. The reason I refer to him is that he is convinced from his own experience of dealing with many thousands of patients that sin is a reality, regardless of what we may have done with the idea of it—"There are no substitutes for words like 'sin' and 'grace,'" he argues —and that sin is destructive. In one of the later sections of the book he analyzes what he calls "The Old Seven Deadly Sins (and Some New Ones)" and concludes wisely, "The long-term consequences of hate [the word that best summarizes the many types of sin, in his opinion] are self-destruction. Thus *the wages of sin really are death* (my emphasis)."

How does this operate? Menninger suggests that self-destruction is observable in each of the old

"deadly sins."

Pride (of power, knowledge, or virtue) destroys relationships. It turns us into people who look on others as possessions to be amassed, exploited, or controlled.

Lust (which embraces all sexual sins) destroys one's personality. It weakens loyalty, undercuts trust, and destroys integrity.

Gluttony destroys the body—in whatever form it appears, whether as overindulgence in food, drink, or drugs. "Gluttony... is sinful [because] it represents a... love which is self-destructive."

Anger destroys others, whether by violence or by words only. To wound another's pride or status by words is "to kill him" slowly.

Sloth destroys opportunities and ambitions.

Envy, greed, avarice, and affluence destroy contentment, even a proper sense of freedom and nobility. Menninger tells of a very rich man who had been brought to him by his relatives because he had tried to commit suicide. Life no longer held anything of interest for him. "I haven't the slightest idea what to do with all my money," he said. "I don't need it, but I can't bear to give it away."

"So you decide to kill yourself in order to get away from it," Menninger replied.

"What else can I do?"

"Could you establish a memorial to your beloved father, endowing certain art forms in the smaller cities over the country, all named for him?" the doctor suggested.

The rich man brightened up. "That would be wonderful," he said. "My father would have loved that. Sure, I could do it easily. I would enjoy it.

It would honor him, well, both of us, forever. Let me think about it. I might just do that."

But he didn't. He existed for a few more years, then died, prematurely, "to the satisfaction of his heirs and business associates who were not yet in his predicament, although they suffered from the same 'disease,'" says Menninger.

Waste, cheating, stealing, lying, cruelty, and other vices—all are sins, and they are all destructive.

The wages of sin really is death, as the Bible states and Menninger confirms. And if it is death in this life, as it obviously is, it is surely death in the life to come.

The Way of Life

But enough about the first half of our text. It is time to look at the second half, with its great contrasts. The second half says, "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." What marvelous contrasts these are:

death *versus* life
sin *versus* God
wages *versus* God's free gift

We have already looked at the first side of these great contrasts. Let us look at side two.

1. *Eternal life.* This means far more than mere physical life, of course, since the wicked also possess physical life for a time. It also means more than mere existence, for the wicked, too, will exist for eternity. "Eternal life" has to do with knowing God, as Jesus said: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). It is to know him in an ever-increasing measure. It means holiness coupled to all joy and blessedness. It means realization of that chief end for which we were created, namely, "to glorify God and

to enjoy him forever" (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism,* Answer 1).

Moreover, eternal life is something that begins now. We have eternal life from the very beginning of our new relationships to Christ, from the moment we believe on him.

2. *God.* The first of these contrasts, the one between death and life, is what we naturally expect. Say one, and we think naturally of the other: life and death, death and life. This is not so with the second contrast. Sin does not suggest God as its opposite; it suggests the word *righteousness.* What we would expect the sentence to say is that "the wages of sin is death" and that "the wages of righteousness is eternal life."

There is a sense in which Paul could have said this, of course. The chain of terms he has been developing since chapter five leads to that idea: on the one hand, disobedience, wickedness, condemnation, death; and on the other hand, obedience, justification, righteousness, life. But if Paul had said "the wages of righteousness is life," we would immediately have assumed that we can earn salvation by our good works, and Paul is too wise a teacher to let that happen.
Therefore, at the very point at which we might expect him to say "righteousness," he puts "God," to teach, as the Bible does throughout, that "salvation comes from the Lord" (Jon. 2:9).

In other words, no one but God can get us out of the predicament Karl Menninger describes in *Whatever Became of Sin?*

Do you know the Latin phrase *deus ex machinal* It is from classical drama, and it refers to the introduction of God into the action to resolve a problem. Aristotle had a rule for using God in the drama. He said that God must never be introduced as a *deus ex machina* unless the characters have gotten themselves into such a dilemma that only a god can get them out of it. This is the case here. That is exactly the kind of problem we have gotten ourselves into by our practice of sin. We are

trapped in it, like elephants in quicksand or houses in a sinkhole. It takes God to get us out.

3. *The gift.* The Bible teaches that salvation is the gift of God. The Greek word is *charisma*, which actually means "a free gift." It means "grace." Wages are something we earn. They are the result of our working or doing. A gift is something that is unearned. It is free. That was the point to which we came at the end of Romans 5, and it is a theme we will uncover again and again throughout this letter. In fact, we discover it in all our dealings with God in this life. We could translate Romans 6:23 to read: "The wages of sin is death, but the *grace* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Are You in Jesus?

I want you to notice one final thing about this verse. We have treated the contrasts, which are a sermon in themselves. But I am sure you have noticed that we still have one important phrase left over. It is the phrase "in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is not part of the contrast. "God" is set against "sin," "gift" against "wages," "eternal life" against "death." Why, then, does Paul include it?

Obviously, because it brings out what was all-important to him, indeed the great truth for which the entire Book of Romans has been written. We are now at the end of Romans 6. Paul has summarized the gospel as the free gift of God to his people, something they could never have earned. He is going to talk next about the use and limits of the law. But it is as if Paul stopped here and reflected: "I have said that salvation is the free gift of God. But surely I can't let it go at that. Salvation is the gift of God, yes! But how is it possible for God to be thus gracious to us? How can he have given us the gift of eternal life, we being the sinners that we are?" The answer, of course, is that it is *by, in* or *through* Jesus Christ, which is why he adds the phrase "in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul never forgot that we are saved from sin only because of Jesus' work.

And that raises a final question—a personal one, because religion always is personal; it must be. *Are you in Jesus?* Is Jesus your Savior, your Lord? There are only two ways you can answer that question, either "Yes" or "No." He either is your Savior or he is not.

If he is, let me ask these follow-up questions: Are you living for Jesus? If you are not, why not? He gave himself for you. He died for you. He even lives for you. Paul's purpose in Romans 6 is to show that if you have been delivered from your bondage to sin by Jesus, it is so that you might thereafter be his, starting in this life. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "... You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19b-20). In the midst of a world that is being swept along by the flood torrent of sin, you are to stand out as Jesus' servant. You are to live for and witness to him.

The other way you can answer my question is "No." And if that is the case, I ask why you would willingly keep going on such a self-destructive path, particularly when the way of salvation is known to you. Haven't you been trapped by sin long enough? Don't you long for deliverance?

I like the way Charles Haddon Spurgeon ended his sermon on this text. He referred to the question God asked the prophet Ezekiel when he stood in the Valley of Dry Bones. "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezek. 37:3). Ezekiel was too wise to say what we probably would have answered in those circumstances. He said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (We would have said, "Not likely!") But when he was told to preach to them he did, and those dry bones came together, took on flesh, rose up, and became a great army.

That is what is necessary if you are to be delivered from sin, says Spurgeon. The wages of sin is death, and spiritually speaking you are as dead as those dry bones in the valley. No one but God can bring life out of death. No one but Jesus can make your dead bones live. God can do it. And he will as you come to him. You need to come. You need to come now.

Part Eight. Freedom from Law

Chapter 86.
Freedom from the Law

Romans 7:1-4

The seventh chapter of Romans is one of the best-known chapters in the Word of God. It is an important chapter. But for anyone who sets out to explain and teach it, as I am doing, it is both formidable and frightening. Why? For several reasons.

First, it has been a focal point for much heated controversy. In this chapter, from verse 14 to the end, Paul writes of his own intense struggle against sin. But of what period of his life is he writing? Is Paul writing of himself as he was before his conversion? Or is he describing himself as he was at the time of writing, that is, after his conversion? Is he writing theoretically only? Or is he describing a real struggle? These verses continue to be a focal point of debate, since they bear upon current teaching concerning "the carnal Christian," if there is such a thing, and with what some call "lordship salvation."

The first section of the chapter (vv. 1-6) presents a problem, too. This is the section in which Paul introduces the illustration of marriage law to show how Christians have been freed from law in order to be married to Jesus Christ.

The illustration seems simple on the surface, but it has proven baffling to many. The main difficulty is that the illustration refers to a wife who is bound to her husband as long as he lives but is freed to marry another if he dies. It illustrates how the believer has died to the law in order that he or she might be married to Christ. But in the illustration it is the husband and not the wife who dies, and it is the wife who remarries. Besides, what does the husband represent? Is he the law? If so, what law? Law in general or the Old Testament law in particular? If not the law, what does he represent? Ray Stedman thinks the husband

represents Adam. Saint Augustine and some of the Reformers thought he represents our old, or corrupt, nature.

There are even more problems in these verses, as an examination of nearly any commentary will show.

William Barclay said of Romans 7, "Seldom did Paul write so difficult and so complicated a passage." C. H. Dodd is intemperate in his remarks, objecting that "the illustration... is confused from the outset." He advises us "to ignore the illustration, as far as may be, and ask what it is that Paul is really talking about in the realm of fact and experience." That is hardly advice for the serious commentator to dispense.

The Most Difficult Problem: Application

I write as a preacher, however, and from my perspective the greatest problem with Romans 7 is not the interpretation of the chapter (which, in the final analysis, I do not believe is all that difficult) but rather the task of applying it to our own lawless age. Let me explain.

You will remember from our earlier studies that I have described Romans 6 and 7 as a parenthesis in a larger section embracing chapters 5-8. The larger section concerns the assurance and finality of salvation, beginning with the truth that, having been justified by the work of God in Christ, we now have "peace with God," and ending with the triumphal cry (in chapter 8) that nothing will be able to separate us from that relationship. In the course of this section the apostle deals with two questions that arise naturally from his thesis: (1) Doesn't a doctrine like this lead to immoral behavior, since it seems to be saying that we will be saved eventually regardless of what we do? and (2) Doesn't it make the law of no account, or useless? This second problem would be particularly acute for the Jew who had always rightly regarded the law as God's good gift.

Paul answers the first of these questions in chapter 6, showing that the gospel does not lead to immorality but rather to the reverse. This is because, in saving us from sin, God has joined us to Jesus Christ, as a

result of which those who have been saved must and will live for him. Paul answers the second question—"But what about the law?"—in chapter 7.

But here is the problem. We live in a day when people have little concern for law, in fact, when most people try as hard as they can or dare to be lawless. So how do you say to people who do not care about law that the law is important? Or, harder yet, how do you tell them that they must be freed from law in order to live for righteousness (which is what Romans 7:1-6 says), when they are already acting as if they are freed from it—but in the wrong way? How do you make what you have to say about the law of God relevant?

A Universal Problem

Most commentators are agreed that "the law" referred to in Romans 7 is law in general and not the Old Testament law specifically, and that the word *brothers* in verse 1 refers to all Christians and not to believing Jews only. But the "all" includes the parts, and for that reason I begin with the problem that Paul's teaching must have presented to believing Jews. I also begin here because this part is the easiest to understand.

The problem was twofold. First, there was the problem I have already spoken about, namely that Paul's teaching about being justified by God apart from law seemed to make the law worthless or, worse yet, harmful. How could any true Jew accept that? The Jew knew that the law had been given through Moses from Mount Sinai, accompanied by frightening manifestations of God's presence. Nothing could have been more weighty or solemn than God's giving of the law on Sinai. The Jew rightly regarded the law as God's great, good, and beneficial gift to man. How could such an important gift be set aside?

The other problem was this: In a paradoxical manner, although the law was good, it was also an overwhelming burden. It imposed a strict code of legalistic behavior that was back-breaking for those who took it seriously. The Jews had a word for it. They called it a yoke, like those put upon animals to harness them for hard labor. That is what it was like

to be a godly Jew. The Jew was proud of his yoke. It was from God; it set him apart from the godless peoples around him. Nevertheless it was still a yoke, and it was a great and overwhelming burden.

Do you remember how Peter spoke of this, in a moment of unusual clarity at the great Council of
Jerusalem described in Acts 15? There were people at the council who wanted to impose the Old Testament law on Gentile believers, and Paul, followed by Peter, argued that this was a wrong thing to do. Peter's argument was telling: "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" he asked (v. 10). His words were a candid admission that trying to live by the law of God had been onerous and impossible.

But is this only a Jewish problem? I said a moment ago that the whole includes the parts; therefore, the Jewish problem is included. But how is it that more than Jews are involved? How does the problem affect the Gentile?

In the following way. You remember perhaps that in the opening section of *Mere Christianity* the great Cambridge professor and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis argued that all persons recognize and feel bound to live by a certain moral standard. Lewis called it "the law of human nature," and he illustrated it from the way people argue. They say things like, "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?" "That's my seat, I was there first," "Leave him alone; he isn't doing you any harm," "Why should you shove in first?", "Give me a bit of your orange; I gave you a bit of mine," or "Come on, you promised." Lewis believed—I am sure he is right—that statements like this show that all people everywhere recognize a standard of behavior to which they and others are supposed to measure up.

They may disagree about certain details of that standard, of course, and they may apply it wrongly. But all nevertheless believe in what used to be called Right and Wrong. And not only do they believe in it, they

expect others to believe in it and live by the "right" standard, too. Thus the appeals for right conduct I have quoted.

Lewis also had another main point in his argument, and it is that we have all broken this law of nature. What is more, we feel guilty for breaking it, which is why we usually try to cover up for our bad behavior or make excuses for it.

These facts of human behavior show that in a certain sense the Gentile as well as the Jew is "under law" and knows himself to be condemned by it. Therefore the problem that Paul is dealing with in Romans 7 is a universal human problem.

In his study of Romans, Ray C. Stedman suggests four proofs that all persons are naturally "under law," even without possessing or being subjected to the specific law of the Old Testament. They are worth listing.

1. *We are proud of our achievements.* At first glance, this seems to prove recognition of a standard to which we have been able to measure up and to which others have perhaps not been able to measure up (at least not so well), not how we feel condemned by those standards. But it actually does show how we feel condemned, because our pointing to some area of moral achievement in our own lives is usually a diversion to keep people from looking at our failures in other areas. For example, the philanthropist may boast of the $100,000 he has given to some charity primarily because he is feeling guilty about how he or she acquired the money in the first place. Perhaps he neglected his family in order "to make his mark" or even cheated someone out of it. "The law reveals failure. Therefore, one of the first marks of a person who is living under the law is that he is always pointing out how well he is doing," says Stedman.

2. *We are critical of others.* This is another diversionary tactic. It is the "scapegoat" ploy. Get people thinking about how others have failed, and perhaps they will overlook us. And there is this, too: In

a strange way, we are usually most critical of others precisely in those areas where we are ourselves most at fault. It is the proud who most hate pride in others. It is cheaters who are most sensitive to being cheated by their associates.

3. *We are reluctant to admit our own failures.* This is the reverse side of boasting. It is because we instinctively feel the weight of the law over us that we attempt to cover up our failures. If we did not sense ourselves to be "under law" and rightly "under law," would we bother? We would not deny breaking a standard the validity of which we do not recognize.

4. *We suffer from depression, discouragement, and defeat.* This gets to the real heart of the problem, for it shows how futile it is for people to try to raise moral standards merely by enacting or proclaiming new laws. Social reformers generally think that all that is necessary to raise the moral standard of a community is to inform people of what is right and provide a few incentives for them to choose it. But it does not work that way. All of us are already "under law," and we are already breaking the law we have. What good does it do to have more laws? Or better laws? Or higher laws? All the so-called better laws do is increase our sense of failure and heighten our anxiety. We are defeated enough already.

"What a wretched man I am!" we might cry. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" The answer, which Paul gives at the very end of Romans 7, where he asks those very questions, is not a new law but "God—though Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25). The rescuer is a person!

From Death to a New Life

Nevertheless, we are "under law." The Jew was (and is) under the law of the Old Testament. The Gentile is under the law of nature. And that is just the problem. The law cannot save us, as Paul proved early on in Romans. The law cannot sanctify us either, as he is showing now. Still we are under it. It is all very good to say that the answer to a holy life is

not the law but a person, but that does little good if we are still under bondage to the former.

This is where Romans 7:1-4 comes in, of course. For what Paul tells us in these verses is that the solution is death. We must die to one (law) in order to be free for another (Jesus Christ). The law has an important role to play. Paul will explain that carefully in the next section (vv. 7-13). But his first teaching in reference to law is that we must be freed from it and that the only way we can be freed from it is by death.

This is where the argument gets difficult. But let's try to follow it carefully.

First, Paul states a fact upon which all can agree, namely, "that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives" (v. 1). That should be self-evident. As long as we are alive we are bound by the laws of the country in which we live. But if we die, we are freed from those laws.

Obviously you cannot require a dead person to do anything, nor punish him or her for failing to do it. Everyone can agree on this point.

Second, Paul gives an illustration from common experience, citing the case of a woman who is married to a certain man. His argument goes: "For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man" (vv. 2-3). The point of the illustration is simplicity itself: The death of the husband releases the wife from the law that bound her to the marriage.

I am convinced that most errors in interpreting this passage come from trying to get it to teach more than that, more than Paul intended. We should remember that this is not a proof of Paul's point; it is only an illustration. More importantly, it is not an allegory. That is, it is not necessary to assign meanings to each of the illustration's parts. In fact, if we try to do that, we are at once led into difficulty, as I tried to indicate

at the beginning when I mentioned the diverse meanings that have been assigned to the husband in the supposed illustration.

But why didn't Paul carry the illustration through in a way that would have avoided these problems? One reason is that it does not work out properly, no matter how you try it. If the husband represents the law, then the law dies in order that we might marry another, who is Christ. But the law does not die. It lives and has value. In verse 12, Paul is going to argue that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." Actually, *we* are the ones who have died—in Christ, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20 ("I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live...").

Try it that way, then. Make the husband who has died represent us. If we do that, the illustration falls apart because, being dead, we cannot marry another person, which is what Paul wants to suggest.

Why use an illustration at all, then? I think there are several good reasons. In his commentary, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives four of them:

1. *A woman who is married to a man is under the authority of that man.* This is not so true today, in our feminist age, but it was true of the age in which Paul wrote, just as it has been in most ages of human history and in virtually all places. Husbands had authority over wives, rather than each being equal in authority or wives having authority over husbands. This is what Paul wants to show. The human race is under obligation to the laws of nature and of God, and is bound by them. No one is free to write his or her own moral code or to abandon law entirely. We are responsible.

2. *The subjection of a wife to a husband in marriage is a lifelong subjection.* Today we think of marriage as being easily broken by divorce, and by "no fault" divorce at that. But this was far from Paul's mind. He was thinking scripturally, as Christians still try to do today in marriage services. We have the parties repeat: "I, Mary, take thee, John [or I, John, take thee, Mary], to be my wedded husband [or wife]; and I do promise and covenant, before God and

these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful wife [or husband], in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." The illustration of marriage shows that we are under the authority of God's law for this life.

3. *In spite of the permanent nature of this relationship and the resulting authority, there is nevertheless the possibility of entering into another relationship.* How? It becomes possible if one of the parties dies.

This is the point Paul is particularly concerned to make, which we can see by the fact that, having made it one way in verse 2, he immediately states it all over again in verse 3, saying, "But if her husband dies, she is released from the law and is not an adulteress...." What is Paul showing in this verse? Let me repeat that he is not working out an allegory in which the husband stands for something and the wife stands for something else. What he is stressing is that the law of marriage is not violated by the new relationship—if the husband has died. Rather, the law is upheld. The woman is freed from the law binding her to the first husband so that she might marry another *in a legal manner.*

Do you see how this is working out? Paul's opponents were saying, "But what about the law? Doesn't the gospel you have been preaching annul the law or set the law aside?" Paul's answer is that this is far from the case. In the gospel of God's free justification of the sinner, the law is fully honored, satisfied, and upheld. Salvation is a "fulfilling of the law." But at the same time it is liberation from it, which is necessary if you and I are to be able to step forward in Christ to live a morally fruitful life.

This leads to the fourth and most important point.

4. *The object of the new relationship is "that we might bear fruit to God"* (v. 4). Commentators seem afraid of this last point, no doubt feeling that the thought of bearing offspring to Christ is somehow indelicate. I do not feel this to be the case at all. Paul is concerned for righteousness, which is the fruit of God, and the idea is: How

> are we to attain this righteousness so long as we are married to law (or, if you prefer, to Adam or to our old sinful nature)? The old husband is impotent. The law never engendered righteousness in anybody. So how can we be fruitful? The answer is: Death must terminate the old relationship in order that we might enter into a new, fruitful relationship to Jesus Christ.

How does this happen? It happens by our dying to the law in Christ. That is, his death becomes our death. Therefore, when we die in him we die to the law, and when we rise in him we rise to the new relationship. Now God says to us, as he said to our first parents in the Garden of Eden, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28a). Not with physical offspring, of course, but with righteousness produced by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 87.
Our Second, Fruitful Union

Romans 7:4

Of all the scriptural illustrations of what it means to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ in salvation, none is more pleasing than the illustration of marriage. It is because love, courtship, and marriage are themselves pleasing and because our relationship to Jesus is a love relationship.

Many times, when I am asked to perform a wedding, either the man or the woman will mention that some of those coming to the service will not be Christians and inquire whether it might be possible for me to make the way of salvation clear as part of my marriage meditation. I always reply that I am glad to speak about the gospel and that it is easy in this context, for nothing so clearly illustrates what it means to be a Christian than the marriage service. In a service like this I will say that the Bible portrays Jesus as the passionate lover, devoted bridegroom, and faithful husband of his bride, the church, and that we are portrayed

as that bride. Moreover, I will say that the marriage vows particularly illustrate the relationship.

Jesus took the vows first of all, for he sought us long before we knew him or had responded to him. He said:

I, Jesus, take thee, Sinner [for that is what we are], to be my wedded wife; and I do promise and covenant, before God the heavenly Father, to be thy loving and faithful Savior, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for this life and for all eternity.

After he had said that, the time came when we looked up into his loving face and repeated with corresponding ardor:

I, Sinner, take thee, Jesus, to be my loving Bridegroom and Savior; and I do promise and covenant, before God the heavenly Father, to be thy loving and faithful wife, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for this life and for all eternity.

I point out that it is the exchange of vows formally witnessed that makes the marriage, just as it is the fullness of saving faith that binds us to Jesus in salvation. For faith is not mere knowledge about Jesus any more than merely knowing about a man joins a woman to him or a man to a woman. Nor is faith even loving Jesus, important as that is. It is a promise to be his forever.

Joined to Jesus

This is the illustration Paul has been unfolding in the first verses of Romans 7, as we began to see in the previous chapter. He showed that the law is not abrogated by the manner in which God has saved us in Christ, but rather that the law has been both honored and satisfied. He did this by showing that law has a claim on people only as long as they live. Once they die, their relationship to the law is ended.

When we first began to look at this illustration—showing that "a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage"—I pointed out that confusion follows if we take the illustration as allegory. That is, as

soon as we attempt to establish the identity of the husband who has died, we have trouble. He cannot be the law; the law is not dead. Nor can he be ourselves; for Paul's point is that those who are Christians have died to the one in order to be married to the other. (If we are to be identified with any one of the parties, it must be the woman.) When we studied the illustration in the last chapter, I argued that the comparison is not to be taken allegorically but only as an illustration to show that death releases any person from the law.

Yet, in verse 4, the last verse in which Paul uses the illustration, the apostle actually does work this out in terms of our relationship to Christ, showing how death to the law operates and how the result is a new and fruitful relationship. His teaching in verse 4 does not perfectly fit his illustration—no illustration is perfect—but it *is* the gospel.

What is Paul's point? Simply that the object of God's having freed us from the law, to which we were bound, was that we might be joined to Christ and be fruitful. In fact, it is even stronger than that. In Greek the sentence ends with the words "in order that we might bear fruit to God," which means that in this case it is the fruitfulness of the Christian, rather even than his union with Christ, that is emphasized.

And why not? Paul has been teaching that, having been saved by God, we must live a holy life. Now, by the image of a fruitful marriage, he teaches that this has been God's object in saving us all along.

Why has God saved us? In the context of today's self-centered culture, even as Christians we tend to answer this question in exclusively personal terms by talking about God's love for us. It is not wrong to do this, for Jesus told us that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). But we might do far better to answer that God loved us and Jesus died for us *so that we might be holy.*

What was God's object in saving us? Let us state it clearly. According to these first few verses in Romans 7, *God saved us so that we, who beforehand were lost in sin and wickedness, might live a holy life.*

What I want to pursue in this study is how the union of the believer with Christ, illustrated by the marriage relationship, actually leads to this end. That is, I want to show how this new relationship produces holiness. It does so in several important ways.

Miss Sinner, Mrs. Christian

First, holiness is produced because when we become Christians we take the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as ours, just as a woman traditionally takes a man's name for hers when she marries him. She may have come into the church as Miss Jones, for example. But if the man she is marrying is named Smith, she goes out of the church as Mrs. Smith. This exchange takes place in most Christian marriage ceremonies. In fact, the part in which it does is my favorite part of the service. After the bride and groom have exchanged vows and rings and I have spoken about Christian marriage and prayed for the couple's marital union, I say: "Now, by the authority committed unto me as a minister of the church of Jesus Christ, I declare that John Smith and Mary Jones *Smith* are now husband and wife, according to the ordinance of God and the law of the state of Pennsylvania."

At that point both the new husband and the new wife generally relax a bit and smile, the bride with a sweet and contented joy that she at last belongs to her new husband and he with an equally wonderful joy that she is his.

That is what happens when you are joined to Jesus in fruitful Christian union. Before this, you were Miss Sinner, for you were under the law of God and rightly condemned by it. You were a sinner by choice and by divine decree. But when you have been set free from that old union by dying to it in Christ and are raised to another union "in him," God gives you Christ's name. So you who before were Miss Sinner are now Mrs. Christian—"Christian" means "Christ one"—and whatever you do from this point on will reflect either favorably or disfavorably upon him.

Does this have bearing on how we Christians now live our lives? It had better. If it does not, it is questionable whether we have actually been

joined to him.

Have you noticed how people are often very proud of their names? Some belong to families with ancestors who came to this country on the Mayflower at the very beginning of our country's history. They are proud of that. Some have descended from patriots who fought in the American Revolution—the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) is a celebrated organization. Others point to soldiers of the Civil War in their family tree. Some have ancestors who made great fortunes or were known for their important contributions to politics, art, literature, or science. This, too, is a justifiable source of pride in many instances. But it cannot compare with the pride that should be ours as the bride of Jesus Christ. Paul's letter to the Philippians tells us that God has given Jesus "the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9b). There is no higher privilege than to bear the name of Jesus Christ, to be known as a Christian. How, then, can we dishonor it? How can we do anything other than strive constantly to live a holy life as Christians?

Daughters of the King

The second way this marriage to Christ leads to holiness is through the new status it gives us.

This is also true in an earthly marriage. A woman may have come from a distinguished family, but if she marries a man who is an alcoholic, thereafter she will be known as the wife of a ne'erdo-well. She is known by *his* status rather than the exalted qualities of her ancestors. On the other hand, she may have come from a very humble background, but if she marries the heirapparent to a throne, she will be known thereafter as a princess and perhaps eventually as a queen. It is the same with us as Christians. Before we were saved we had the low status described by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (most of whom were Gentiles). We were "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Now we are "no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household,

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (vv. 19-20).

By our union with Jesus Christ we have become sons and daughters of the great King of the universe, God the Father. There is no status anywhere that tops that! We should live accordingly.

How can the children of God act like the devil's offspring?

"The Rights and Privileges Thereunto"

This leads to the privileges conveyed by our new, enhanced status. Not long ago I took part in a college graduation ceremony and heard again those words that are often pronounced to new graduates in such a setting. The president of the college welcomed the hundred or so graduates into "the society of learned men and women" and conveyed upon them "all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities pertaining thereunto." Similarly, because of the new status it imparts, marriage brings corresponding rights, privileges, and responsibilities. This is especially true of our marriage to Jesus Christ. As his bride—as Christians—we have many special privileges, all of which produce holiness in us.

1. *Access to God in prayer.* Earlier, when we were studying the phrase "we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Rom. 5:2), I pointed out that this is not referring to prayer so much as to our having gained the status before God of justified men and women. Now I must add that, although Romans 5:2 is not talking about prayer specifically, the status to which it refers nevertheless guarantees our access to God in prayer. It is because we are God's children that we may come to him.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," said Paul (Phil. 4:6-7).

We need no better proof of this than what Jesus told us: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14).

2. *Provision for all our needs.* We live in a need-centered age, which means that most people are constantly thinking about what they want or think they want, and how to get it. It is a negative feature of contemporary life; it is frustrating. As Christians, instead of always thinking about our own needs, we need to be concentrating on the needs of others. However, it is certainly true that we do have needs, and one of the privileges of our new relationship to God the Father through Jesus Christ is that God promises to supply them. He is willing because it is his nature to do good to his creatures. He is able because, being omnipotent, he has an unlimited supply of riches at his disposal. Paul also wrote of this to the Philippians, saying, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

3. *Jesus' personal care and protection.* What would you think of a wife who was in serious trouble and whose husband refused to help her? You would say, "Well, he's not a very good husband. How could he be so indifferent, so callous toward his own wife?" No one will ever be able to make that complaint against Jesus. He is our faithful helper and constant protector.

Jesus, our Bridegroom, is with us each step of our journey through life. He said, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20b). As he accompanies us, he also works with us to make us all that he would have us be. In Ephesians, where Paul also speaks of marriage, the apostle writes: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27). Jesus does this for us in full measure.

Again, Jesus is present to deliver us from temptation. Paul assures us that "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

4. *The Bible.* There is a sense in which all the world has the Bible; it is available to be read by anyone. But having the Bible is much more than that if we are Christians. Together with the sacred text, we also have the ministry of the Holy Spirit so that, when we read its pages, the Holy Spirit interprets the Bible to us and we hear the voice of the Lord.

Beyond the sacred page I see thee, Lord;
My spirit pants for thee, O living Word.

It was of such moments of personal Bible study that another hymnwriter wrote so eloquently:

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses, And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, The Son of God discloses.
And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
And tells me I am his own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who lists many of these privileges in his study of Romans 7:4, says,

If you would know the love of Jesus "what it is," give him opportunities of telling you. He will meet you in the Scriptures, and he will tell you. Give time, give place, give opportunity. Set other things aside, and say to other people, "I cannot do what you ask me to do; I have another appointment, I know he is coming and I am waiting for him." Do you look for him, are you expecting him, do you allow him, do you give him opportunities to speak to you, and to let you know his love for you?

It is through such quiet meetings more than in any other way that we will grow in holiness.

For This Life and for Eternity

The fourth way our new marriage to Jesus Christ produces holiness is by bringing us into a love that will never fade and a relationship that will never end. We died to our unfruitful first marriage to the law when we died in Christ. That marriage ended. But now, having been raised in Christ, who will never die, and having been joined to him, we are assured of a love that will last forever. As I say in my reworking of the marriage vows, it is "in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, *for this life and for all eternity*." "But suppose my love is weak?" you ask.

Don't say "suppose." As a new bride of Christ, your love for him *is* weak, but it will grow. It will grow here on earth, and it will go on growing throughout eternity.

"Suppose my love should grow cold?" you wonder.

That is a sad thing to imagine since there is no excuse for it, but it is true that this sometimes happens. We get involved in the affairs of this world and forget the Lord for a time. We neglect prayer and Bible study. We do not pause to hear his voice. Like the beloved of Solomon's Song of Songs, we do not come to Jesus when he calls. We say, "I have taken off my robe—must I put it on again?/I have washed my feet—must I soil them again?" (Song of Songs 5:3). Then, when we turn to the Lord at last, he is not there. Ah, but he is still seeking us. He has only used our neglect of him to show us how much his love means and how empty our lives are without it.

"But suppose I betray his love, as Gomer betrayed the love of Hosea?" God forbid that you should ever do that! But even if that should happen, Jesus' love is greater even than your betrayal. He died to deliver you from the condemnation of the law and purchase you for himself. Do you think he will abandon you now? The Bible tells us, "If we are

faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself (2 Tim. 2:13).

One day the great God of the universe is going to throw a party. It will be the most magnificent party that has ever been held. The banquet will be spread in heaven. The guests will be numbered in the billions. The angelic legions will be there to serve these honored guests. Jesus, the Bridegroom, will be seated at his Father's right hand. And you will be there, too, for this is the great marriage supper of the Lamb. You will be there. Do you understand that? *You will be there.* Nothing is going to keep you from that great celebration—if you are really joined to Jesus Christ.

So what are you doing? Are you living a halfhearted life for Jesus Christ now? If you know where you are headed, you will be preparing for that day with every spiritual thought you have and with every deed you do. You will be bearing fruit for God, because on that day of celebration you will be able to lift it up and offer it to him with pure hands and with joy unspeakable.

Chapter 88.
Then and Now

Romans 7:5-6

Our text here is the fifth and sixth verses of Romans 7, and in the very middle of these verses, linking them, as it were, are the marvelous words "But now." They have already occurred once in the previous chapter (v. 22). They point to the tremendous change that has taken place in the life of the one who has come to Christ as Savior, and they are so important that D. Martyn LloydJones was no doubt right in saying, "If the expression 'But now' does not move you, I take leave to query whether you are a Christian."

This is a change Paul has been talking about all along, of course. He has been pointing to the difference in a person's life when one who formerly

was apart from Christ becomes a believer.

As far back as Romans 5, Paul contrasted our being in Adam with our being in Christ. The former is what we were before our conversion. The latter is what we have become after it—what we are now. In chapter 6 he contrasted our original slavery to sin with our new and happy slavery to God. In the first verses of chapter 7 he spoke of two marriages and explained how we have died to the former in order to have the latter. Paul is developing the same idea here. It is obvious that he is, because he begins with the word *for,* thus linking this section with what has gone before.

Paul wants us to know—Can we possibly doubt this after what he has said earlier?—that to be a Christian is to be "a new creation" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). To be saved means that we are no longer what we were and that we must live differently.

In the Flesh or in the Spirit

Since the strength of these verses is in the powerful terms Paul uses, we need to spend some time in understanding them. The first important term is "sinful nature" or, more literally, "flesh." "Flesh" (*sarx*) is the word the Greek text uses.

This term has already occurred several times in Romans. But this is the first time it has occurred with the special theological meaning Paul so often gives it in his writings. In this fuller, theological sense it will appear many times more in the remainder of this chapter and through verse 13 of chapter 8. It is so important and is used so often in these chapters that we must take special pains to understand it. If we fail to understand it, we will err not only in interpreting these two verses but also in interpreting the rest of Romans 7 and Romans 8. Some have made this error, of course, and the result has been at least one (and probably more than one) wrong doctrine.

The problem is that the word *flesh* is used in different senses, as many English words are. What does the word *mind* mean in English? It usually means "brain." But it can also mean

"determination," as in "having a mind to do something." As a verb it can mean "be careful," as in "mind what you do." In philosophy "mind" can mean the controlling spirit of the universe. It is the same with *sarx* in the Greek language.

Basically *sarx* means the soft or fleshly parts of the body, which is how the resurrected Jesus used the word when he told the disciples that "a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39). Sometimes "flesh" means the whole body, as in Galatians 2:20: "... the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (KJV). (The New International Version of that verse translates "in the flesh" as "in the body.") Sometimes *sarx* refers to the sensual part of our nature. That is why Paul can say in Galatians 5:17a, "For the sinful nature ['flesh'] desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature." At still other times "flesh" can refer to the whole of mankind, as in the translation "all flesh" (KJV) in Isaiah 40:6; 1 Peter 1:24; and other passages.

What does "flesh" (*sarx*) mean in Romans 7:5? In this case it obviously does not mean the whole of mankind, because it is being used as a contrast to those who are "in the Spirit." And it is not referring to the body or even to any parts of the body. In Romans it is a term for the unregenerate, for unbelievers. It is what we were before God saved us.

We see this clearly in Romans 8: "Those who live according to the sinful nature ['flesh'] have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (vv. 5-9).

Eduard Schweizer says of this characteristic theological use of the word by Paul, "Where *sarx* is understood in a full theological sense... it

denotes the being of man which is determined, not by his physical substance, but by his relationship to God."

The "Carnal" Christian?

Paul's use of the word *flesh* ("sinful nature") in Romans 7 and 8 is so clear that it would be unnecessary to elaborate this point were it not for an unfortunate misuse of the term in some areas of contemporary Christianity. This misuse is commonly known as "the doctrine of the carnal Christian"—"carnal" being only another word for "flesh." It leads to a serious misunderstanding of the next section of Romans, as well as other passages.

The idea of the carnal Christian is that human beings fall into three different classes: (1) those that are not saved; (2) Christians who are sinful, immature, or "carnal"; and (3) Christians who are "spiritual." In a study of Romans it is usually said that the "man" portrayed in Romans 7:14 and following is an example of the carnal Christian. He is saved, but he is not living that way. He is defeated. It is most often said that what he needs to do is get out of Romans 7 into Romans 8.

He needs to live "in the Spirit."

Since we are going to deal with this at greater length in subsequent studies, what I have to say here is only preliminary. Still, even in a preliminary way, it is necessary to point out that the doctrine of the "carnal" Christian does not fit this context. It is important to see this, for we will never understand Romans 7 and 8 correctly if we think of them as describing a defeated Christian who somehow becomes a victorious one. Paul is not talking about a carnal Christian *versus* a spiritual Christian at all, but rather about an unbeliever *versus* a Christian. The contrast is between what we were before our conversion and what we are now. It is the same contrast seen in being in Adam *versus* being in Christ, or being in slavery to the law *versus* being God's servants, which we have already seen in earlier sections of Romans.

That can be made quite clear to most people. Yet many will still ask quite understandably, "But what about 1 Corinthians 3?" In that chapter

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly ("fleshly")—mere infants in Christ.... For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?" (vv. 1, 3).

Those verses are often cited as the best support for the carnal-Christian doctrine in Scripture, but a close examination will show that that teaching does not follow from Paul's statements. They are mistakenly supposed to teach that men and women can become Christians and yet continue in a sinful or carnal state, passing on to a fuller commitment later. But that is precisely what 1 Corinthians 3 does *not* say. The Christians in Corinth were indeed acting badly, as Christians frequently do. In that area of their lives they were "worldly." That is, they were acting as if they were not Christians, as "mere men," unregenerate. But because they were not unregenerate but were actually Christians, they had to stop that bad behavior. Their sin was inconsistent with what they had become in Christ and was therefore intolerable.

This is precisely what Paul has been saying all along in these middle chapters of Romans. He has been teaching that the Christian is not what he was before he became a Christian and, for that very reason, he must (and will) live differently.

Sin Aroused by the Law

The next thing Paul says, as he develops the contrast between what we were then and what by the grace of God we have become now, is that our relationship to the law has changed profoundly. That is, not only have we been changed; our relationships, beginning with the law, have changed, too.

Here again we have to look at a few terms carefully. The first is "passions," which occurs in the phrase "sinful passions" (*pathēmata tōn hamartiōn*). By itself the word *passions* is neutral and even somewhat passive. It is based on the Greek word from which we get our word *pathos*, and it corresponds to what we usually mean when we speak of our natural appetites, impulses, or emotions. Impulses can be good or

bad. That is, they can flow from good or bad desires, and they can be acted upon by good or bad influences. But here Paul links these normally neutral passions to sin, calling them "sinful passions," pointing out that when the law is allowed to work upon them it excites them not to good but to bad behavior.

What does this mean? Does it mean that the law of God, which is "good," as Paul is going to say in verse 12, itself turns morally neutral appetites or impulses into bad appetites or impulses? Not at all! The problem is that in the unregenerate man or woman these impulses, though not necessarily good or bad in themselves, are in fact bad, because they have been corrupted by our sinful natures. When the law tells us that we should not do something, our sinful natures rebel and do evil instead.

The law is good, but we are not good. Hence, before our conversions the law actually increased rather than reduced immorality.

Again, we will be considering this at greater length in future studies, for verses 5 and 6 are a seedbed of important ideas that Paul develops later. Still we need to see even here how profound Paul's statement is. What Paul is saying is that the cause of sinful acts lies in the sinful nature (or corrupted passions) of unregenerate people and not in the absence of good laws. In fact, there is a sense in which, because the problem is in *us,* good laws, even the good laws of God, merely aggravate or increase the sinful conduct. Because of our perversity, they actually make things worse.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was very perceptive at this point, arguing (I think rightly) that there is a type of secular teaching of morality that does more harm than good, particularly among the young. This has bearing on our current efforts to teach sex education in the public schools. Morality can be taught by example and by a discussion of worthy values. We can talk helpfully about honesty, generosity, fair play, and such things. But trying to teach morality by introducing young people (or anyone else) to behavior they have not yet heard of or know little about— deviant sexual practices, for instance, or the use of drugs

—does not prepare them to resist the sin but only instills in them a desire to commit the sin in question.

Here is what Lloyd-Jones says.

To teach morality may be a positive danger, for it tends to inflame the passions; it encourages them.... A minister of religion once told me that the book that had done him the greatest amount of harm in his own personal life was a book entitled *The Mastery of Sex.* Avoid such books, for they will do more harm than good. The reason is that 'the motions of sins' are actually inflamed even by the Law of God. The very law that prohibits them encourages us to do them, because *we* are impure. So morality teaching can even be a positive danger. By teaching children about sex, and by warning them against the consequences of certain actions, what you are really doing is to introduce them to the whole subject. Naturally they will greatly enjoy it, their curiosity will be aroused, and they will desire to read further.

But I hear someone ask, "What shall we do, then? Are you telling us that we should never mention matters of morality to our children?" No, that is not it. There is a place for the right kind of moral teaching. But even with right moral teaching, you should know, if you are a Christian, that the important thing is not whether your children know what is right or wrong, though that is important, but whether they are Christians, too. For they are no different from ourselves. And what Paul is saying here is that before our conversion the law served only to arouse our sinful passions. It pushed us to sin. It was only after we had come to Christ that this changed and we found ourselves being drawn in the way of righteousness by God's Spirit.

Let us stop fooling ourselves about our children. The reason many of them are acting so badly is that they are not Christians. And let us also stop fooling ourselves about many of the grown-up churchgoers we know. The reason they do the sinful things they do is that they are not Christians either. Christians can sin, and they do. But they do not continue in it. What they do is what Paul says they do in verse 6: "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the

law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

Serving Him

That brings us to the final contrast in these verses. We have looked at the contrast between what we were and what we are now. We have looked at the contrast between our former and present relationships to the law. The final contrast is between what we did as unbelievers, the "fruit" we bore, and our present fruitfulness as Christians.

"What was the sum total of our work as unbelievers?" asks Paul. "We bore fruit for death" is his answer (v. 5). This is a different way of putting what he said in verse 4, though it amounts to the same thing. In verses 2-4, where he was using the marriage illustration, he was saying that we were fruitless while married to the law, because the law was impotent. He meant that we were unable to do good works. Now, in apparent contradiction, he says that we actually did bear fruit. However, his point is the same, for the fruit we bore then was fruit for death. Hence, we could do nothing to please God, and all we did do displeased him.

Even when we thought we were doing fine! Paul knew this by experience. He says in Philippians that before he met Christ he was so outstanding in his conduct that he could claim to have been "faultless" in respect to legal righteousness (Phil. 3:6). To use the terminology of Romans 7:6, he was indeed serving faultlessly "in the old way of the written code."

But it was not "in the Spirit." So not only was it not acceptable to God, it was actually evil. It was an exercise in self-righteousness, and it led even to the persecution of Christians. It was "fruit" of a sort. But it was fruit unto "death" quite literally.

What a difference when a person comes to Christ! In coming to Christ he or she is freed from a former unfruitful marriage to the law. The word Paul uses here (*katērgēthēmen*) is the word used in verse 2, where

he spoke of a woman being freed from the law of marriage to her former husband by his death. Paul's point is the same. We died to the law in order to be brought into a new and fruitful relationship.

But let me now apply this in a slightly different way than I have done before. Up to this point I have been stressing what Paul himself has been stressing: that if we have been saved by God through the work of Jesus Christ, we must (and will) live differently. I have said that if we are not living differently, if we are simply continuing in sin as before, we are not Christians, regardless of our outward profession. I have often said to fellow Christians that the fruit of conversion must be seen in our lives.

Now I want to say something more. If those about us who are Christians really are Christians, not only is it the case that they *must* bear fruit to God—serving "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code"—they actually *are doing so,* regardless of whether or not they are doing it in precisely the way you and I are doing it. They may be very different from us and may be serving in very different ways. But if they are truly Christians, they are serving God, and we should acknowledge it.

I want to tell you an incident from the life of Donald Grey Barnhouse that illustrates this truth. He was at a luncheon of ministers, and one of them remarked on the frigidity of a certain denomination. He was bothered by how little its ministers seemed to accomplish. Barnhouse replied by probing the thoughts of the others a bit further. He told of a scholar in that denomination who went through theological seminary and was ordained. But he seldom preached. In fact, he never went to a prayer meeting and even absented himself from church for many weeks at a time. He was really a bookworm and spent his days in the library. Even worse, he was intemperate in certain of his personal habits. The man lived this way for more than twenty years.

"What is your opinion of such a minister?" Barnhouse asked.

The others agreed that a man like that was no credit to the ministry.

The conversation took another turn, and Barnhouse asked what study helps these ministers used in sermon preparation, especially what they considered to be the most helpful concordance. They were unanimous in preferring Strong's concordance. ("Strong's for the strong. Young's for the young. Cruden's for the crude," we used to say in seminary.) They seemed to prefer Strong's for its Hebrew and Greek helps and for its comparative word lists. It saved them hours of work each week and was, they agreed, their most valuable tool.

Barnhouse then said, "The man whom you said was no credit to the ministry was James Strong, the author of the concordance you all find so valuable."

The ministers quickly saw the point. God does not give his children identical jobs to do. The ways they are called to serve vary. But all are serving in some way, if they are truly Christians. Barnhouse wrote, "The most forlorn Christian in the most humble surroundings, living in penury on the lowest cultural scale, is serving a purpose in the divine plan. The convert from a savage tribe, the professor in his study, the flighty young girl—all are serving the Lord. We must not be satisfied with the way we are serving him, but we must be satisfied with the place where God has put us. He wants you exactly where you are today."

Let's accept that—for others and for ourselves—and then make sure that we are actually serving him faithfully.

Chapter 89.
Sin's Sad Use of God's Good Law

Romans 7:7-12

A person would have to be extremely dense to have come as far as we have in our study of Romans and still not understand the limits of the law according to Paul's teaching. In the earliest chapters he has shown that law cannot justify a person. In the later chapters he has shown that

neither can the law sanctify anyone. Therefore, if we are to be delivered from sin's penalty and power, it must be by the work of God in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit.

But sometimes the very weight of an argument proves too much and appears to collapse because of it. That is what many people—perhaps you are one of them—might think here.

Someone might say: "Paul, you have shown that the law cannot justify or sanctify a person; it cannot declare him to be upright, and it cannot help him to become upright if he is not. If that is so, what is the value of the law? Doesn't that mean that the law actually has no worth and should just be thrown out entirely?" Or again: "You have said that sin is aroused by law so that those who hear the law actually do bad things they would not otherwise do. If that is the case, aren't you making the law of God sinful since it leads to evil?"

Since the law is from God, and God cannot do evil or produce anything that is evil, the gospel Paul teaches seems to collapse by this extension of it. However, these are faulty objections. The verses to which we come now show emphatically why the law is not sinful. In particular they speak of three good things the law does, even though it is powerless either to justify or sanctify a person.

The Law Reveals Sin As Sin

The first thing the law accomplishes, according to verse 7, is to reveal sin as sin. The verse says, "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.'"

There are two problems here, and it is important to understand both. The first problem is that if left to themselves, people never naturally think they are sinners. Take Genesis 6:5 as an example. It says that prior to the flood "the LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." That is a description of sin as God sees it—*every*

inclination of the thoughts of our hearts only evil all the time. But who really believes that? Who believes that his or her every inclination is to do evil? No one believes it apart from a supernatural illumination of his or her mind by the Holy Spirit.

Or take Romans 3:10-12, which we studied earlier: '"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'" No one naturally believes that unless God reveals it to the person.

The second problem is this: Even if, by some means, we are able to admit that we have done bad things, we are never able to recognize those things as "sin" unless we can also be shown that they transgress the law of God. If we do things against the law of nature, or disregard standards of fair play or other moral criteria most people acknowledge, we may recognize those acts to be
"wrong." We may violate the legal code of the country in which we live and recognize our acts to be "criminal." But we do not call either the morally wrong behavior or the criminal acts "sin" unless we see that these also violate God's law.

So the first good thing the law does is reveal that we are sinners. It does this by showing that the bad things we do are an offense to God. Leon Morris has it right when he says, "People without God's law do not see wrongdoing as it really is.... It takes the law to show wrongdoing to be sin."

In the second half of verse 7, Paul gives an illustration that is apparently from his personal experience, since this is the first place in the chapter where he speaks in the first person. His example has to do with covetousness, which is condemned by the last of the Ten
Commandments. Paul seems to be saying that this was the point at which the conviction that he was himself a sinner was activated.

We know what Paul thought of himself before God began to work with him, because he tells about it in the third chapter of Philippians. Did Paul think he was a sinner in those days? When he was going around

hating Christians? And killing some? Not at all! On the contrary, he thought that he was a very moral man. He says that as far as "legalistic righteousness" is concerned he considered himself to be "faultless" (Phil. 3:6). He thought he was a model of virtue. It was only as the law began to work on him—starting with the words "Do not covet"— that he saw himself as a sinner.

The Law Provokes Sin

The second good thing the law of God does is provoke sin, thereby drawing forth the realization of how bad sin really is. Here is the way Paul puts it: "But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire..." (v. 8). This is what I call "sin's sad use of God's good law." We see it in several areas.

1. *Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, creates a surge of rebellion in our hearts.* The rebellion has been there all along, of course. That is what it means to be a sinner. It means to be a rebel against God. But when the law comes, this dormant rebellion is aroused from its slumber, as it were, and we discover what we are at heart.

Let me give two illustrations.

First, a biblical illustration. In the third chapter of Genesis we are told how Adam and Eve rebelled against God regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If God had not given them this law, there would have been nothing for them to have rebelled against and they would have continued in innocence. However, as soon as God said, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17), this was the one thing Adam particularly wanted to do. Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in him that covetous desire.

We know that Adam and Eve possessed an original innocence. So it is hard to explain—perhaps impossible to explain—how they could have rebelled against God's law. We cannot explain where sin came from.

Nevertheless, the story of the fall is given to us in the form it is given to show how the law itself brings out our rebellion.

Here is an historical illustration. Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* tells of a time in his youth when he and a band of his friends went into a neighbor's field at night to steal pears. They shook the neighbor's pear tree, knocking down a large quantity of pears, then carried them off, eating a few but throwing most of them to some pigs. Why did Augustine steal the pears? With characteristic thoroughness, this great medieval theologian analyzes the question for many pages.

Was it the beauty of the pears? They were beautiful, it is true, since they were part of God's creation. But that was not why he stole them. He had others of even greater beauty at home.

Was he hungry and needed something to eat? That was not it.

Did he want to be approved by the others? That was part of the reason, he says. But it does not explain why the others, like himself, should have given approval for such a wrong act. Why should stealing be praiseworthy?

At last Augustine gets to the real reason, saying, "I only picked them so that I might steal.... I loved nothing in it except the thieving." It is a way of saying that the desire to steal was awakened by the prohibition.

2. *Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, creates a desire to sin in ways that were not even thought of before.* In telling us not to do something, the law actually sets us to thinking about it, and because we are sinful people we soon find ourselves wanting to do that very thing.

Here is a personal illustration. One spring, when I was in the sixth grade, our school principal came into the classroom just before we were to be released to go home for lunch. He said he had heard that some of the students had been bringing firecrackers to school, and he wanted to say that this was definitely not allowed. Firecrackers were dangerous. They were against

Pennsylvania state law. If any of his students even brought a firecracker into school, even if he did not set it off, he would be expelled from school immediately. He would never be able to come back.

Well! I did not own any firecrackers. I had not even been thinking about firecrackers. But, you know, when you get to thinking about firecrackers that really is an intriguing subject. And as I thought about them I remembered that one of my friends had some.

On the way home for lunch a friend and I went by this other friend's house, picked up a firecracker, and returned to school with it forty-five minutes later. We went into the cloakroom, invited another boy to come in with us, and said, "You hold the firecracker by the middle of the fuse. Pinch it very tight. Then we will light it. The others will think that it is going to explode. But when it burns down to your fingers it will go out, and everything will be all right."

What we had not counted on was that the lighted fuse would burn our friend's fingers. When it did, our friend dropped the firecracker. It exploded in an immense cloud of blue smoke and tiny bits of white paper, in the midst of which we emerged, a bit shaken, from the closet.

You cannot imagine how loud a firecracker sounds in an old school building with high ceilings, marble floors, and plaster walls! Nor can you imagine how quickly a principal can rush out of his office, down the hall, and into one of the classrooms. The principal was there even before my friends and I had staggered through the cloakroom's open door. He was as stunned as we were, though differently. I remember him saying over and over again, after we had been sent home and had come back to his office with our parents, "I had just made the announcement. I had just told them not to bring any firecrackers into school. I just can't believe it." He couldn't believe it then. But I am sure that our rebellion, as well as countless other acts of rebellion by thousands of children over the years, eventually turned him into a staunch, believing Calvinist—at least so far as the doctrine of total depravity of children is concerned.

That is what the law does. It provokes wickedness. Moreover, in doing so, it shows us not only that sin is sin, a violation of the law of God; it also shows how strong sin is. It must be very powerful if it can use even God's good law for such ends.

The Law Brings Us to the End of Ourselves

The third good thing the law does is bring us to the end of ourselves—to "death." This is what Paul is talking about in the latter half of this section, where he says: "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death" (vv. 9-11).

What does this mean? In what sense was Paul once "alive apart from the law"? Was he ever without knowledge of the law? And in what sense was he put to death?

The meaning of the passage seems to be quite clear. There was a time in Paul's life—we were talking about it earlier in regard to his claim to have been faultless as to legalistic
righteousness—when Paul thought he was in good standing before God. God had told him what to do, and he had done it. If ever there was anyone who had pleased God, surely it was himself, Paul. As Leon Morris says, "He [was] alive in the sense that he had never been put to death as a result of a confrontation with the law of God." But then the commandment came. That is, it came home to him. He had known it before. If he is still referring to covetousness at this point, as he may be, he had known not to covet from his youth. But now he began to understand the commandment, and with this his self-righteousness and self-confidence began to melt away. The words he uses are: "I died."

What happened to him is what I have been describing. When the law finally began to get through to Paul to do its proper work, he saw (1) that he was guilty of having broken it, and (2) that his nature was such

that, instead of wanting to keep it, he actually wanted to break it. Instead of driving sin out, the law awakened sin. He saw how hopeless his sinful condition was.

But that was a good thing, you see! As long as Paul thought he was doing all right, he was on his way to perdition. It was only when he learned he was lost that he was ready to hear God's words about the Savior.

Is the Law Sin? Certainly Not!

Is the law sin, then? That is the question with which Paul started out. Here is his answer: "Certainly not!" (v. 7). Rather, as we have seen, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (v. 12). The law does exactly what God sent it into the world to do, and that purpose, actually a threefold purpose, is good.

This leads to a few important conclusions.

First, *the law can never save anyone.* It never has saved anyone and it never will. It was not meant to. Therefore, if you have been thinking of yourself as a fairly decent person—who generally measures up to whatever moral standards seem reasonable—and believe that God should be glad to accept your self-assessment, bless you in life, and in the end receive you into heaven, it is not the case that you have been hearing and obeying the law. Rather, you have not really begun even to understand it. The law is condemning you, but you, in your ignorance, are supposing that everything is all right.

What has been happening to you is what Paul describes in verse 11. "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived" you. How? By making you think that everything is fine, when actually you are perishing.

How subtle sin is! In his commentary on these verses, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones lists nine ways in which sin commonly deceives us.

1. Sin gets us to misuse the law, convincing us that as long as we have not sinned outwardly and visibly, we are all right, forgetting that with God the thoughts and intentions of the heart are all important.
2. Sometimes sin changes its tactics and tells us that everything is hopeless and we might as well keep on sinning.
3. Sin tells us that it does not matter whether or not we are holy. It says, "Why don't you keep on sinning so that grace may abound?"
4. Sin deceives us by making us angry at the law, feeling that God is against us if he prohibits anything. If he were for us, we think, he would let us do what we want to do and be happy.
5. Sin gets us to believe that the law is unreasonable, impossible, and unjust.
6. Sin makes us think very highly of ourselves. It makes us ask why we should be bound by any law. Why shouldn't we become what Friedrich Nietzsche called a "superman" or a "superwoman" and be a law unto ourselves?
7. Sin tells us that the law is oppressive, keeping us from developing the wonderful gifts and talents we have within us, all of which would emerge if only we did not have to be held back by God's commandments.
8. Sin makes righteousness look drab and unattractive.
9. Sin causes us to discount the consequences of willful disobedience. It whispers what Satan said to Eve, "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). It says that the most preposterous idea in the whole world is hell, forgetting that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of hell more often than anyone else in the Bible.

If you are expecting to be judged righteous by God on the basis of your own good works, which is a form of law-keeping, sin has tricked you

by one or more of these common spiritual deceptions, and you have not even begun to know what the law has been given to us for—let alone know and understand the gospel. Let me say it again: The law was not meant to save anyone. It was given to reveal sin as sin, to provoke sin in sinners, and to make clear our completely hopeless condition apart from Jesus Christ.

The law points us to Christ, whom we need desperately, especially if we are blindly trusting in our ability to keep it for the sake of our salvation.

Second, *we need to teach the law to awaken people to their sinfulness and show them their need of a Savior.* This is what the Puritans did so brilliantly. They even spoke of it by the terminology Paul uses in Romans. They said it was the preacher's task to "slay" men by the law so that they might be "raised up" by the gospel. We need that kind of preaching today. People need to know the uselessness of their own good works and so-called righteousness. They need to know how utterly hopeless the situation is without a Savior. They need to be convinced in their very bones that Jesus Christ is the only hope they have.

Instead, the majority of our churches provide largely self-help sermons and seminars designed to make people feel that they are doing very well, or at least are able to do very well, all by themselves. These churches do not use the law to bring them to the utter end of their selfconfidence.

And it must be the *utter* end, which is why the Puritans spoke of "slaying" people with the law. To slay means to kill. It does not mean to wound or make sick. It means to destroy selfrighteousness.

John H. Gerstner, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's retired Professor of Church History, was preaching on Romans and expounding on the law. He was stripping away the veil on human wickedness. After the service, when he had gone to the back of the church, a woman approached him. She was holding up her hand with her index finger and thumb about a half-inch apart, and she said to Gerstner, "Dr. Gerstner, you make me feel this big."

Gerstner replied, "But, Madam, that's too big. That's much too big. Don't you know that that much self-righteousness will take you to hell?" He was right. The law was given to drive out *all* self-righteousness so that we might embrace Jesus Christ alone as our Savior.

Chapter 90.
Whatever Became of Sin?

Romans 7:13

As we have seen in our study of Romans 6:19-22, that is the question Dr. Karl Menninger, founder of the world-renowned Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, asked in the title of his best-selling book of 1973. His answer was simple. In the lifetimes of many of us, Menninger argued, sin has been redefined: first, as crime—that is, as transgression of the law of man rather than transgression of the law of God—and second, as symptoms. Since "symptoms" are caused by things external to the individual, they are seen as effects for which the offender is not responsible. Thus it happened that sin against God has been redefined (and dismissed) as the unfortunate effects of bad circumstances. And no one is to blame.

Yet sin *is* sin—and we *are* to blame. Sin, whether we acknowledge it or not, really is "any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God" (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer 14).

This is what Paul has been talking about in Romans 7, of course. He has not begun at the point with which I have begun this chapter: with our lack of any true sense of being sinners. Rather, he has been approaching it from the other side, writing about the law and its functions. But the link between these two elements, sin and the law, is a matter of importance and is what Paul has been treating. His argument is that it is only by the law of God that we learn that sin really is sin and discover how evil it is.

Do you remember how Paul made these points in the paragraph containing verses 7-12? He argued that:

1. The law reveals sin to be sin.
2. Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandments of God, creates a surge of rebellion against those commands in our hearts and creates desires to sin in ways that we had not even thought of before.
3. In this way, the law, operated upon by sin, brings us to the end of ourselves.

And all this is good! Prior to receiving and understanding the law, we all think that we are doing pretty well, that we do not need a Savior or even God. It is only when the law has exposed our true nature to us, showing how bad we are, that we become open to the gospel.

This is now stated again in verse 13. In fact, what Paul says here is almost a direct echo of verse 7. "Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful."

Following up on that verse, I want to show in this study how the law actually operates. I want to do it by reviewing the Ten Commandments.

The First Commandment

The first commandment begins where we might expect it to begin, namely, in the area of our relationships to God. It says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2-3).

This command requires us to worship the true God and to worship him only. John R. W. Stott writes:

It is not necessary to worship the sun, the moon and the stars to break this law. We break it whenever we give to something or someone other

than God himself the first place in our thoughts or our affections. It may be some engrossing sport, absorbing hobby, or selfish ambition. Or it may be someone whom we idolize. We may worship a god of gold and silver in the form of safe investments and a healthy bank balance, or a God of wood and stone in the form of property and possessions.... Sin is fundamentally the exaltation of self at the expense of God. What someone wrote of the Englishman is true of everyman: "He is a self-made man who worships his creator."

To keep the first commandment perfectly, which is the only way rightly to keep this or any of the commandments, is, as Jesus taught, to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37; cf. Deut. 6:5). It means giving him first place in everything, in all our loves, goals, and actions. It means using all we are and have in his service. No one has ever kept this command perfectly except Jesus.

The Second Commandment

The first commandment dealt with the object of our worship, forbidding the worship of any false deity. The second commandment deals with the nature of our worship, forbidding us to worship even the true God unworthily. It speaks of this at length, saying, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:4-6).

What does this mean? Is it a condemnation of idol worship only, a text forbidding us to worship by means of gold, silver, wood, or stone objects? Obviously it means more than that. It concerns the worship of God by any and all inadequate means.

One inadequate means, one "idol," is the mental images of God we carry about in our heads. J. B. Phillips wrote an entire book about this,

calling it *Your God Is Too Small.* He spoke of our inadequate images of God by such chapter titles as: Resident Policeman, Parental Hangover, Grand Old Man, Meek-and-Mild, Absolute Perfection, Heavenly Bosom, God-in-a-Box, Managing Director, Perennial Grievance, Pale Galilean, and so forth. We all have these inadequate ideas of God, which we prove by our irritation with God when he refuses to conform to our misunderstanding of him as "small," or when he declines to do precisely what we want him to do on some occasion.

A second way we worship unworthily is by going through the forms of worship without actually engaging our hearts or minds in our devotions. We go to church, but our minds are somewhere else. We pray, but it is only our heads that bow down, not our hearts.

The Third Commandment

The third commandment says, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Exod. 20:7). This law is widely flouted in our time, and not only by people who swear ferociously—or even mildly, by using the almost universal exclamation, "Oh, my God!" The commandment is broken when we confess Jesus to be "Lord" but do not follow him as Lord, or when we call God "Father" but do not trust him as the loving parent he is.

The great Puritan pastor and writer Thomas Watson said, "We take God's name in vain:

1. When we speak slightly and irreverently of his name....
2. When we profess God's name, but do not live answerably to it....
3. When we use God's name in idle discourse....
4. When we worship him with our lips, but not with our hearts....
5. When we pray to him, but do not believe in him....

6. When in any way we profane and abuse his word....
7. When we swear by God's name....
8. When we prefix God's name to any wicked action....
9. When we use our tongues any way to the dishonor of God's name....
10. When we make rash and unlawful vows....
11. When we speak evil of God....
12. When we falsify our promise."

Some people may take such ways of dishonoring God's name lightly, thinking them of no great account. But God says that *he* takes the third commandment very seriously. He says that he "will not hold anyone guiltless" who commits these offenses.

The Fourth Commandment

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exod. 20:8-11).

These verses contain the longest elaboration on any one of the Ten Commandments. Yet there are differences among Christians concerning their interpretation. Some insist that they require Christians to worship on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Seventh-day Adventists are an example. Others believe that Christians are to worship on Sunday, the Lord's Day, but want their observance to be according to Judaic tradition, that is, to observe the Sabbath by inactivity, as the ancient

Jews did. Still others think of the Lord's Day as a Christian innovation, a new day given to the church by God for worship and joyful service.

I think the New Testament supports the latter view. But I ask whether we really observe either Saturday or Sunday in any special way. Do we use the whole of either day for worship or Christian service? Who among us truly keeps the Sabbath or the Lord's Day "holy"?

The Fifth Commandment

When we pass from the fourth to the fifth commandment, we also pass from the first table of the law, which concerns our relationships to God, to the second table of the law, which concerns our relationships to other people. It begins with family relationships: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12).

This chiefly has to do with human authority, for our parents are the first human authority God sets over us. Other authorities, all with different and variously restricted powers, include the state, the leaders of the church, and our employers. To fulfill this command we would have to do what Paul says further on in Romans: "Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Rom. 13:7). Yet we all rebel against authority, beginning in the home. At times it seems that the home is where we are particularly rude, unmannerly, disobedient, and ungrateful.

The Sixth Commandment

"You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13). Jesus explained this command by showing that it concerns more than the taking of another person's life. It also concerns damaging his or her reputation in any way. "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment," Jesus said (Matt. 5:22).

This commandment searches the depth of our beings, for if we are honest with ourselves we will admit that we are often very angry and

say things explicitly intended to hurt the target of our anger. But is there no such thing as righteous anger? Of course. Jesus displayed righteous anger when he drove the money changers from the temple. But our anger is seldom like that. Instead, our anger is generally aroused only by some real or imagined slight against ourselves. Do we commit murder? Yes, we do—by this definition. We murder by neglect, spite, gossip, slander, and many other acts flowing from our own enormous pride or jealousy.

Even preachers! Thomas Watson, himself a preacher, said, "Ministers are murderers [if they]... starve, poison or infect souls."

The Seventh Commandment

The seventh commandment is the one most of us think about most often when we remember God's commandments, if we remember them at all. This is hardly a surprise, because most of us are thinking of sexual matters, even sexual sins, most of the time, and this is one command that speaks directly to this area of our lives. It is in light of our sexuality that we seem to feel most guilty.

"You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14).

Jesus commented on this commandment also and, as in his interpretation of the prohibition against murder, he showed its true intention: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). John Stott has written of this commandment:

It includes flirting, experimenting, and solitary sexual experience. It also includes all sexual perversions, for although men and women are not responsible for a perverted instinct, they are for its indulgence. It includes selfish demands within wedlock, and many, if not all, divorces. It includes the deliberate reading of pornographic literature, and giving in to impure fantasies.... The commandment... embraces every abuse of a sacred and beautiful gift of God."

The positive side of this command is chastity before marriage and faithfulness afterwards.

The Eighth Commandment

"You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15). The ban against stealing is almost a universal standard of the human race. It is found in most cultures. But it is only biblical religion that explains why it is wrong to steal, in addition to the obvious fact that theft is socially disruptive and inconvenient. The real reason it is wrong to steal is that what the other person possesses has been given to him or her by God. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights..." (James 1:17). Therefore, to take anything from one to whom it is given is to sin against God.

We do this in many ways. We steal from an employer when we do not give him the best work of which we are capable or when we waste time or leave work early. We steal from our customers if we charge too much for our products or services or if we knowingly sell what is inferior. We steal from others when we borrow from them but do not return what we have borrowed on time, if at all. We steal from ourselves when we squander our talents or time. We steal from God directly when we neglect to give him the worship, honor, thanksgiving, and obedience he deserves.

There is a positive side to this command, too. For Paul, when he was writing to the Ephesians, said to those who had been thieves, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Eph. 4:28). According to Paul, the eighth commandment remained unfulfilled until the offender began to help others who were in need.

The Ninth Commandment

The ninth commandment says, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16). This is a warning against perjury. But again, it is far more than that. Negatively, it condemns all slander,

idle talk, gossip, unkind rumors, jokes at another person's expense, lies, and deliberate exaggerations or distortions of the truth. It concerns even listening to such unkind things uncritically. Positively, the commandment concerns our failures to rise to the defense of those we know to be verbally abused in any way.

The Tenth Commandment

The tenth commandment is in some ways the most revealing and devastating of all, for it deals explicitly with the inward and not merely the outward nature of the law. It concerns covetousness, which is an internal attitude that may or may not express itself in an outwardly acquisitive act. The text says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exod. 20:17).

Covetousness is a root sin, for, as Watson says, when it is exercised fully it causes a breach of each of the other commandments.

How relevant and modern this is, and how keenly it strikes at our excessively materialistic culture. We live in a grasping and thus very offensive society. One offensive element of materialism is our insensitivity to the needs of others, which it so often breeds, since it is often only at the expense of others that we are able to get ahead. Even more offensive is our unreasonable dissatisfaction with our abundance of wealth and opportunity. Those who have most seem often to be the most unhappy. Unfortunately, this restless desire for more is what the media seem determined to produce in us and fan to white hot flames. There are few who even recognize what is happening, let along resist it substantially.

There is probably no other command that so exposes this characteristic sin of our time and generation.

But where do we go from here? We have used the Ten Commandments to explore ten areas in which God requires certain standards of conduct from us, and we have found ourselves to be sinners by those standards.

And not only have we been exposed as sinners, which is what Paul writes about in the first part of Romans 7:13 ("in order that sin might be recognized as sin"), we have also been shown to be exceedingly sinful, which is what he says in the second half ("so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful"). In other words, sin is always much worse than we imagine. In fact, the more we read and understand the law, the greater our sin will seem to be. And that will continue until, like Paul himself, we cry out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" and we are able to answer, "God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24, 25).

God cannot condone sin, however much we may wish it. He tells us that he will by no means clear the guilty. He teaches that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). His judgment will be executed. But at the very time he exposes the sin, he also points us to Jesus, who is sin's remedy.

Return now to Paul's questions about the law in the first half of Romans 7.

First question: "Is the law sin?"

Answer: "Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law"
(v. 7).

Second question: "Did that which is good, then, become death to me?"

Answer: "By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (v. 13).

And the end of that is life! Why? Because only those who know they are dead in trespasses and sins seek a Savior. Only those who know they are spiritually sick seek the Great Physician.

Chapter 91.
Who Is the "Man" of Romans 7?

Romans 7:14-20

There are few passages in the Bible over which competent Bible students have divided more radically than the last half of Romans 7, beginning with verse 14. This is a section of the letter in which Paul is speaking of himself, describing a fierce internal struggle with sin. And the question is: Of what stage in his life is he speaking? Is he speaking of the present, that is, of the time of his writing the letter—when he was a mature Christian, indeed an apostle? Or is he speaking of himself as he was in the past, before his conversion? Or is the true answer somewhere in between?

Who is the "man" of Romans 7? This question has divided Bible students from the earliest days of the church and continues to divide them today.

It is a serious question, too. Some problems of Bible interpretation may be of limited importance, the specifics of prophecy, for instance. But this is a section of Romans in which Paul is discussing the Christian life. He seems to be answering two related questions: How can I live a triumphant Christian life? How can I achieve victory over sin? Any true Christian wants the answer to those questions. So, unlike differing opinions concerning other, less practical parts of Scripture, we all instinctively take seriously the discussion of any diverse interpretations of this passage.

How should we proceed? In this study I want to present four main interpretations of these verses and evaluate each one.

The "Man" of Romans 7 Is Unsaved

The first view is that the "man" of Romans 7 is the apostle Paul as he was while unregenerate, that is, when he was not yet a Christian. This seems to have been the dominant view in the early church. In fact, the great Saint Augustine held it at first, though later, as a result of his maturing study of the Bible, he came to believe that what is said here is true of the regenerate person, too.

According to this view, Paul could not say the things he says here if he were truly a Christian.

What things?

Well, that he is "a slave to sin," for example (v. 14). This claim is particularly troublesome because Paul has previously said, "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Rom. 6:17-18). If Paul is speaking as a Christian, how can he say that Christians have been freed from sin's slavery in chapter 6 and then say that he is himself "a slave to sin" in chapter 7?

Paul also says, "Nothing good lives in me" (v. 18). True, he qualifies that at once by adding, "that is, in my sinful nature." But even so, can a believer really speak in these terms, knowing that God dwells within him and is working "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13)?

A bit further on Paul cries, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (v. 24). Doesn't he know that he has been rescued by Christ? How can any true Christian make that statement?

In spite of the appeal of this interpretation, which is considerable, the view has several major flaws which in our day have caused most commentators to abandon it. Let me suggest a few.

1. *What Paul says of himself in Romans 7:14-24 is not what Paul says of his pre-Christian state in other passages.* Paul is distressed over his inability to fulfill the law's just demands. He is wretched as a result of his failure. He is calling out for deliverance by someone outside himself. But what unbeliever ever thinks like that? What Paul thought of himself before his conversion is summarized in Philippians 3, where he claims to have been "faultless" as far as "legalistic righteousness" is concerned (v. 6). The unbeliever is not distressed by his failure to keep God's law.

On the contrary, he is satisfied with his performance. He is self-righteous and self-confident. He does not even know he needs to be saved.

Here is the problem in a nutshell: In Romans 7:18, Paul says, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." But when he was an unbeliever he would have said, "I have the desire to do what is good, and I am doing it."

2. *Paul's delight in God's law, expressed in this passage, cannot be found in unbelievers.* What he says in Romans 7 is that "the law is good" and that "in my inner being I delight in God's law" (vv. 16, 22). Is that the attitude of the unbeliever? Not according to Paul's teaching elsewhere in Romans. Just before these verses, Paul has spoken of the effects of the law on sinners, saying that it exposes sin and provokes all kinds of evil desires, that is, rebellion against its demands. In the following section, in Romans 8, Paul argues that "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (v. 7).

The "man" of Romans 7 is one who has moved beyond the hostility to God's law exercised by the unregenerate person.

3. *The present tense is used throughout the second half of Romans 7, and this is an apparently meaningful contrast with the past tense employed earlier.* In verses 7-13, the verbs are in the aorist tense: "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and *I died*" (v. 9); "sin... *put me to death*" (v. 11); "sin... *produced death* in me through what was good" (v. 13). Those sentences (to which I have added italics) are written of a past experience. In verses 14-24, the present tense is used: "I *am* unspiritual" (v. 14); "I *do not* understand what I do" (v. 15); "I *agree that* the law is good" (v. 16), and so on. It is hard to deny that this is speaking of Paul's present, and therefore a truly Christian, experience.

As J. I. Packer says, "Paul's shift from the past tense to the present in verse 14 has no natural explanation save that he now moves on from talking about his experience with God's law in his
pre-Christian days to talking about his experience as it was at the time of writing."

The "Man" of Romans 7 Is a "Carnal Christian"

The second view is a very popular one today. It is best known by the phrase "the carnal
Christian." It holds that Paul is indeed speaking of himself as a Christian (for some of the reasons outlined above) but that he is speaking of himself (or of himself theoretically) as being in an immature or unsurrendered state. Defenders of this view observe that the "man" of Romans 7 is defeated and that this should not be true of the mature Christian. They observe how strongly the focus is on the self —the word "I" occurs twenty-six times in verses 14-24, and the words "me," "my" or "myself twelve times more. The Holy Spirit, the secret to victory in the Christian life, is not mentioned in this chapter at all.

This view sees an enormous contrast between Romans 7, which is thought of as a chapter of defeat, and Romans 8, which is thought of as a chapter of victory through the Holy Spirit's power. Sometimes a Christian is told that the secret to victory is to get "self off the throne of one's life and allow the Spirit to take control—to stop living in Romans 7 and get on to Romans
8.

Is this view valid? Is this what these verses are all about?

This is not my understanding, as I pointed out in a previous study. But let me begin by saying something positive. The truths in "the carnal Christian" theology are that Christians do indeed have a sinful nature and that they are not able to have victory in their lives apart from the Holy Spirit. This is the evident movement from chapter 7 to chapter 8.

The victory that we are to have is not our doing. It is "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 25) and by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8).

Nevertheless, the weaknesses of this view (and I must add also the errors and dangers) far outweigh the truths. The chief weakness is the doctrine of "the carnal Christian" itself. This view postulates a two-stage Christian experience in which, in stage one, a person accepts Jesus as Savior only, without accepting him as Lord of his or her life, and then later, in stage two, goes on to receive him as Lord. This is just not biblical. Above all, it is not what Paul is saying or has been saying in Romans.

One rule of interpretation is that the meaning of any word or phrase must be determined by its context, and if this is applied to Paul's use of the word *carnal*, or *fleshly* (NIV translates "sinful nature"), in these chapters, the result is something quite different from "the carnal Christian" theology. If we look at Romans 8:5-8, we see that these verses contrast an individual controlled by the carnal, or sinful, nature with one controlled by the Spirit. But the contrast is not between worldly Christians and those who have "progressed" to the point of taking Jesus Christ as Lord. The contrast is between those who are Christians and those who are not Christians at all. Paul declares that "the mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (vv. 67).

Does this mean, then, that when Paul uses the word *carnal* (or *fleshly*) of himself in Romans 7, he is speaking of himself as an unbeliever, the first of the views discussed? No, we have already seen reasons why that is not correct. What does it mean then? It means that the struggle Paul is describing is between himself as a new creature in Christ, the new man, and that old, sinful, unChristian nature that he nevertheless retains in some measure. The struggle is part of what it means to be a Christian in an as-yet unperfected state. It does not mean that there is a first or early stage in the Christian life that may be described as "carnal."

We must remember that the flow of Romans 5 through 8 is *from* justification by faith *to* glorification and that chapters 6 and 7 are parentheses, inserted between chapters 5 and 8 in order to deal with Antinomianism (chap. 6) and the purpose and limits of the law (chap. 7). There is no two-stage doctrine of Christianity here at all.

The "Man" of Romans 7 Is under Conviction

A third view has been advanced by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, following, it would seem, a suggestion made a century ago, though briefly, by Frederick Godet. This approach takes everything that has been said thus far with full seriousness, drawing the apparently paradoxical conclusion that what Paul says here can be said of neither the unregenerate nor the regenerate man. The unsaved person cannot speak of the law as Paul does. He does not understand its good and spiritual character. He is in rebellion against it. On the other hand, the saved person cannot speak in such a defeated manner. He cannot cry out for deliverance, because he knows he has already been delivered from the power of sin through the work of Christ. The "man" of Romans 7 is therefore one who does not yet know who can deliver him.

But where does that leave us? If Paul is not speaking of a regenerate or an unregenerate person, of whom is he speaking? Lloyd-Jones answers that he is speaking of one who has been awakened to his personal lawlessness and spiritual inability by the Holy Spirit but who has not yet been made a participator in the new life of Jesus Christ. He is one who, in the language of the
American revivals of the eighteenth century, may be said to have been "awakened" to the truth of his condition but who is not yet "revived." The work has been started, but it has not yet come to fruition.

Here is how Godet put it: "The apostle is speaking here neither *of the natural man* in his state of voluntary ignorance and sin, nor *of the child of God,* born anew, set free by grace, and animated by the spirit of Christ; but of the man whose conscience, awakened by the law, has

entered sincerely, with fear and trembling, but still *in his own strength*, into the desperate struggle against evil."

What shall we say of this interpretation? It sounds reasonable, certainly. It is an attempt to take the data seriously, and it is advanced by sound scholars, particularly Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who examines each phrase carefully. Still, it has problems.

1. *It does not account for the change from the past tense of the verbs in verses 1-13 to the present tense, beginning with verse 14.* According to this view, what Paul says in verses 14-24 is of the past. It concerns the time of his own spiritual awakening, perhaps associated with his role in the martyrdom of Stephen when he began to "kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). There would be no reason for the present tense at all. The only way Lloyd-Jones can deal with this is to say that the change is of no real importance.

2. *It is not true that the "man" of Romans 7 does not yet know who can deliver him.* Paul is writing of a struggle we all feel at times, wanting to do what is right while being unable in himself to do it. But as soon as he cries out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" he has the answer: "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (vv. 24, 25). There is no reason to separate the problem from the answer temporally, as if Paul somehow passes from a state of conviction to a state of grace between the last two verses of the chapter.

The "Man" of Romans 7 Is a Mature Christian

The final view, which is that of most Reformed commentators from the time of the later Augustine forward, including Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans, is that Paul is writing of himself as a mature Christian, describing the Christian's continuing conflict with sin, which we all experience, and teaching that there is no victory in such struggles apart from the Holy Spirit. To put it in other words, since Romans 7 is discussing the function and limits of the law, Paul is saying that just as

the law of God is unable to *justify* a person (justification is made possible by the work of Christ), so also is the law unable to *sanctify* a person. Sanctification must be accomplished in us by the Holy Spirit.

Here is how Packer summarizes these verses:

Alive in Christ, his heart delights in the law, and he wants to do what is good and right and thus keep it perfectly.... But he finds that he cannot achieve the total compliance at which he aims. Whenever he measures what he has done, he finds that he has fallen short (v. 23). From this he perceives that the anti-God urge called sin, though dethroned in his heart, still dwells in his own flawed nature.... Thus the Christian's moral experience (for Paul would not be telling his own experience to make theological points, did he not think it typical) is that his reach persistently exceeds his grasp and that his desire for perfection is frustrated by the discomposing and distracting energies of indwelling sin.

Stating this sad fact about himself, renews Paul's distress at it, and in the cry of verses 24, 25 he voices his grief at not being able to glorify God more: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Then at once he answers his own question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!..." The question was asked in the future tense, so the verb to be supplied in the answer should be in the future tense too: "Thank God! *He will deliver me* through Jesus Christ!"

Paul here proclaims that his present involuntary imperfection, summed up in the latter part of verse 25, will one day be made a thing of the past through the redemption of the body referred to in chapter 8:23.... For that future redemption we must long and wait, maintaining always the twoworld, homeward-traveling, hoping-for-glory perspective that pervades the whole New Testament.

This is the point at which, in the next study, we are going to pick up the story of the continuing struggle of the Christian against indwelling sin. But even here we must make a few observations.

First, when Paul writes of "this body of death" in verse 24, which bemoans his wretched state, he is saying exactly what he said in Romans 6. (Notice the words I have italicized.) Paul spoke of our being crucified with Christ so that *"the body of sin* might be rendered powerless [done away with], that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (v. 6); several verses later, he wrote, "Therefore do not let sin reign in *your mortal body* so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer *the parts of your body* to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God..." (vv. 12-13). In Romans 6, Paul discussed the deliverance that is ours through our having been crucified and raised with Christ. But he also acknowledged the continuing presence of sin in us *through our bodies* and reminded us that we must struggle against it. It is the same in Romans 7, though here Paul is emphasizing the futility of the struggle if it is in our own strength.

Second, although stated in extreme terms in Romans 7, an honest acknowledgment of the hopelessly sinful nature of man apart from the Holy Spirit (which is what we find here), even after a person has become a Christian, is the first step to true holiness. In other words, to say, "I have passed out of Romans 7 into Romans 8," is not the mark of a mature Christian but of an immature one. The mature Christian knows that he is always in Romans 7 apart from the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he knows that dependence on the Holy Spirit is not something that is attained once for all but is the result of a daily struggle and a constantly renewed commitment.

What is sanctification? Is it an awareness of how good we are becoming? Or is it a growing sense of how sinful we really are, so we will constandy turn to and depend upon Jesus Christ? If we are mature in Christ, we know it is the latter.

Chapter 92.
The War Within

Romans 7:21-24

At the beginning of the last study I said that there are few passages in the Bible over which good
Bible students have divided more radically than the last half of Romans 7, beginning with verse 14. Now, having finished that study, you can probably see why. In it I carefully worked through the four main interpretations of these verses, asking the important question "Who is the 'Man' of Romans 7?" We saw that the options are:

1. An unsaved person,
2. A "carnal Christian,"
3. A person who has come under conviction as a result of the Holy Spirit's work in his or her life, but who is not yet born again, and
4. A mature Christian.

In some ways, the last seems hardest to accept. But I tried to show reasons why the fourth of these possibilities is the right one and why it is necessary for us to know it, if we are to move ahead realistically in the Christian life. If we are Christians, we will never get anywhere by assuming that the seventh chapter of Romans is written about someone other than ourselves— someone who is not yet saved or not yet "mature" in the faith, as we are. Paul is writing about himself as a mature Christian and therefore about all who are true believers.

I ended our discussion in the last study by stating that sanctification is the process of coming increasingly to see how sinful we are so that we will depend constantly on Jesus Christ. And that is not easy! The Christian life is a warfare, a warfare within against our inherently sinful natures, as well as a warfare without against external forces. It is extremely important that we see this.

The Passage As a Whole

I think that Paul must have been concerned that we see this and that he recognized that it is difficult. I say this because in these verses Paul

goes to considerable lengths to teach these truths to us.

Notice that in verses 14-24 Paul says almost exactly the same thing three distinct times. The first time is in verses 14-17. The second is in verses 18-20. The third is in verses 21-24. Each of these begins with a statement of the problem: "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (v. 14); "nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (v. 18); and "when I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (v. 21). Each section then provides a description of the conflict: "what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (v. 15); "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (vv. 18-19); and "in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (vv. 22-23). Each section ends with a brief statement of why the problem exists: "it is sin living in me" (v. 17); "it is sin living in me" (v. 20); and "this body of death" (v. 24).

What distinguishes these three sections is that in the first Paul states the matter generally, in the second he states it in terms of his doing what he does *not* want to do, and in the third he says that he finds it impossible to do what he *does* want to do: "when I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (v. 21).

I repeat again that this describes the conflict of a mature Christian man, in fact, the conflict of an apostle of Jesus Christ in his later years. So the struggle Paul speaks of is a struggle we all face and will continue to face—if we are Christians. And the defeat he speaks of is the experience of all—even when we are well along in the Christian life—apart from the Holy Spirit.

"The American Way"

However, Paul is not writing these words to excuse our defeat, still less to encourage it. He is thinking of the victory that can and will be ours (see v. 25 and chap. 8). He wants us to achieve victory in the struggle

against sin by the Holy Spirit. But the point here is that the victory we want comes only through this struggle and not by some secret formula for success or by some easy way of avoiding it.

I believe that at this point we Americans particularly need to hear what Paul is saying, for we hate conflict and are usually trying to avoid it by any means possible. Let me suggest three ways that American Christians try to avoid the struggle against sin, which (according to the teaching of Romans 7) will always be part of our lives.

1. *A formula.* The first way we try to avoid struggle in the Christian life is by hunting for some easy formula that will bring victory. This takes various forms: discovering a Christian book that will tell us what to do, following a three-step or four-step recipe for growth in the Christian life, ceasing to do some easy things (like going to movies), or starting to do more difficult things (like attending seminars). You know what I mean:

"Get out of Romans 7 and into Romans 8."
"Let go and let God."
"Get 'self off the throne of your life and put Christ there."
"Just let Jesus take control."

The underlying motivation for these attempts is our lazy optimism—the expectation that life is meant to be easy, not hard. So, if we do find the Christian life hard, we assume that we are merely missing the right formula. Someone should be able to tell us what the formula is. If we do not find it—and we never will if ease is what we are seeking—we tend to get angry with our instructors or even with God.

2. *A new experience.* The second way we try to avoid struggle in the Christian life is by hunting for some new spiritual experience. This can be a charismatic-type experience—speaking in tongues, perhaps. It can be what used to be called "a second work of grace" in which we pass forever out of a defeated Christian state into a victorious one. Or it can be something as straightforward as an emotional experience in worship. In speaking of emotion in worship I do not mean to suggest that this is bad. It is not. We have

hearts as well as heads, and we are undoubtedly to worship with both. But emotion, even in worship, is bad if it is thought of as a substitute for or an escape from the fight against sin, which is an inescapable part of the lifelong process of sanctification.

To come home from a church service saying, "Didn't we have a worshipful experience?" means nothing unless we have acquired the biblical knowledge with which we can fight against sin and a renewed commitment to do so.

3. *Avoidance.* The third way we try to escape struggle in the Christian life is typically "American": avoidance. That is, when we are defeated, rather than girding up our loins and turning to attack the problem again, we turn away from it and try to fill our minds with something else. Often this "something else" is television or other entertainment. Sometimes it is empty busyness—even in Christian activities. Just as with unbelievers, avoidance may be through alcohol or drugs for some.

Spiritual Realism

What I want to commend to you as we face the fact of the war within us is what J. I. Packer calls "spiritual realism." He talks about it toward the end of his study of the various Christian views of holiness, *Keep in Step with the Spirit.* As Packer defines it, "Realism has to do with our willingness or lack of willingness to face unpalatable truths about ourselves and to start making necessary changes. In light of Romans 7:14-24, I want to suggest four statements with which this spiritual realism should start.

1. *When God called us to be Christian people he called us to lifetime struggles against sin.*

This should be evident from everything Paul says in this passage. But we seem to take extraordinary measures to avoid this truth. One way of avoiding it is by a kind of unrealistic romanticism in which we kid ourselves into thinking that everything is well with us spiritually or is at least well enough for us to get by with for now. This is particularly easy

if we are affluent and do not need to worry about having enough to eat or paying the mortgage and if we can always battle occasional bouts of depression by going out for dinner or by taking a vacation. "No pain, no gain," we say, yet we labor rigorously to avoid spiritual growth pains.

We also avoid this truth by shifting the blame, as Packer suggests in his discussion. It is what Adam and Eve did when God confronted them with their sin in the Garden of Eden.

Adam blamed Eve, saying, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Gen. 3:12). But since he pointed out that it was God who gave him the woman, Adam was really blaming God for his trouble.

Eve blamed the devil: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (v. 13). But since God had apparently allowed the serpent to come into the garden, this was only a slightly gentler way of also blaming God.

Packer says, "We are assiduous blamers of others for whatever goes wrong in our marriages, families, churches, careers, and so on.... Romantic complacency and resourcefulness in acting the injured innocent are among the most Spirit-quenching traits imaginable, since both become excuses for doing nothing in situations where realism requires that we do something and do it as a matter of urgency. Both states stifle conviction of sin in the unconverted and keep Christians in a thoroughly bad state of spiritual health."

The starting place for achieving spiritual realism is to recognize that we are called to a constant spiritual warfare in this life and that this warfare is not easy, since it is against the sin that resides in us even as converted men and women. Realism calls for rigorous preparation, constant alertness, dogged determinism, and moment-by-moment trust in him who alone can give us victory. Here is the essence of the matter in the words of a great hymn by Johann B. Freystein (translated by Catherine Winkworth):

Rise, my soul, to watch and pray. From thy sleep awaken;

Be not by the evil day Unawares o'ertaken.

For the foe, well we know, Oft the harvest reapeth
While the Christian sleepeth.

Watch against thyself, my soul, Less with grace thou trifle;
Let not self thy thoughts control, Nor God's mercy stifle.
Pride and sin lurk within
All thy hopes to scatter; heed not when they flatter.

I do not know any hymn that describes the battle within us better or in more realistic language.

2. *Although we are called to a lifetime struggle against sin, we are nevertheless never going to achieve victory by ourselves.*

This is another point that Americans in particular need to grasp. For while we are as a people very susceptible to either simple, quick-fix solutions or avoidance, we are also very confident of our ability to handle even the most difficult challenges. Like putting a man on the moon, we figure that, however tough the problem may be, with enough energy, skill, resourcefulness, and determination we can solve it. Live a victorious Christian life? Of course we can do it—if we really want to. So we say, "When the going gets tough, the tough gets going!" or, "You can if you believe you can."

In this we are perhaps more like the apostle Peter than anyone else in the Bible. Do you remember Peter's boast that, whatever might be true of the other disciples, he at least would never betray Jesus? "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death," said Peter (Luke 22:33). And he meant it! Peter loved Jesus, and he believed that the sheer intensity of his love would enable him to stand firm even in the midst of the greatest spiritual struggles.

But Jesus knew Peter, just as he knows us, and he replied, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (v. 34).

In himself, Peter was unable to stand against Satan's temptation even for a moment. When the temptation came he fell. But fortunately this was

not all Jesus said to Peter. Although Peter was boastful and self-confident and was wrong in both, Jesus had also told him, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (vv. 31-32).

If we could rephrase those words to express what Peter would probably say to us if he were writing this chapter, it would go like this: "When Jesus told me that he had prayed for me so that my faith would not fail, he meant that apart from him I could not stand against Satan even for a moment. I could not go it alone. However strong my devotion or determination, when the chips were down I would deny him. I did! And so will you—this is what I am to tell you—unless you are depending on Jesus every moment. Moreover, in the great battles of life it is certain that you will fall away and be lost unless he prays for you, which is what he has promised to do. 'Apart from me you can do nothing' is what he told us. I proved the truth of his words by my denial, and you will, too, unless you are depending on him constantly."

3. *Even when we triumph over sin by the power of the Holy Spirit, which should be often, we are still unprofitable servants.*

Why is this so? It is because our victories, even when we achieve them, are all nevertheless by the power and grace of God and are not of ourselves. If they were, we would be able to take some personal glory for our triumphs, and when we die we would bring our boasting into heaven. But our victories are not of ourselves. They are of God. And since they are not of ourselves, we will not boast either on earth or in heaven but will instead give God all the glory.

Consider that great scene in Revelation in which the elders who represent the saints lay their crowns before the throne of God, saying, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power..." (Rev. 4:11). Why do you suppose they do that? And what does the scene mean? Clearly, the fact that the crowns are the elders' crowns mean that they represent the elders' own victories over sin and God's enemies. But, by taking them off and laying them before the throne of

God, the elders indicate that their victories were achieved, not by themselves, but by the power of the Spirit of God that worked within them. In other words, in the final analysis the triumphs are God's alone.

4. *And yet, we are to go on fighting and struggling against sin, and we are to do so with the tools made available to us, chiefly prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, service to others, and the sacraments.*

We are never to quit in this great battle against sin. We are to fight it with every ounce of energy in our bodies and with our final breath. Only then, when we have finished the race, having kept the course, may we rest from warfare. Isn't that what the Bible tells us everywhere?

Ephesians 6:10-12: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Philippians 3:12-14: "... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Hebrews 12:1-4: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not

grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

A Supernatural Gospel

I close this study by suggesting that a gospel in which we must do everything possible to attain a victory over sin—but in which, in spite of all we do or can ever do, the victory when it comes is by God alone and not by us or for our glory—a gospel like that must be from God; it could never have been invented by man. The very nature of our gospel is proof of its divine origin.

Left to ourselves, what do we do? We do one of two things. Either we create a gospel of works, so that our salvation depends upon our own righteousness and our sanctification likewise depends upon our own ability to defeat sin and choose righteousness. Or else we retreat into passivity and say, "Since the battle is God's and there is nothing I can do to achieve victory, I might as well just sit back and let God work." To our way of thinking it seems that it must be either of those two choices. But the Bible, through Paul, says something quite different: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you* to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13, emphasis added).

The Christian life is not easy. No responsible person ever said it was. It is a battle all the way.
But it is a battle that will be won. And when it is won, we who have triumphed will cast our crowns at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ who worked in us to accomplish the victory, and we will praise him forever.

Chapter 93.
Victory! Through Jesus Christ Our Lord!

Romans 7:25

In the first chapter of 2 Corinthians the apostle is describing a time in his life with which you may be able to identify, particularly if you have been struggling against sin. Paul is not writing there of a struggle against sin—he is thinking of physical deprivation and danger—but he writes helpfully: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life" (v. 8).

You have probably felt like that when you have been struggling against some sin, almost in despair. In fact, I am sure you have, if you are really a Christian. The reason I say this is that, if our interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 is correct—if it is a description of the apostle Paul as a mature Christian and not as an unbeliever or a "carnal" Christian—then this almost-despairing struggle against sin is the experience of us all, at least at times. All Christians find themselves wanting to do what is right (because of the life of Christ within) but of not being able to do what they would like to do (because of the continuing presence of indwelling sin). In fact, it is even worse than that. For, as we mature in the Christian life, growing closer to Jesus Christ and thus wanting to be more like him and please him more, the struggle actually grows stronger rather than weaker. Those who struggle most vigorously against sin are not immature Christians but mature ones. The hardest battles are waged by God's saints.

In the midst of our struggles we are sometimes brought to the very edge of despair, to use Paul's word in 2 Corinthians. But if you are close to that point and are thinking negatively, as most of us do at times, I want to say this: Although the struggle is a real one and difficult, the outcome is not bleak or uncertain but glorious—because of God.

That is what Paul comes to at the very end of Romans 7. After he has reached the absolute low point, asking, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" he answers with what Charles Hodge calls "a strong and sudden emotion of gratitude" : "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25). That is, although the apostle was not able to find even the smallest ground for a hope of victory within himself, even

at his weakest point the end is not grim because as a Christian he knows that God is for him. God has assured every believer victory through the work of Christ.

Interestingly enough, this is almost exactly what Paul says in 2 Corinthians where, as I said, he is speaking not of struggles against sin but of physical dangers and troubles. Immediately following his cry of despair ("in our hearts we felt the sentence of death"), he adds, "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us..." (vv. 9-10).

If you are struggling against sin—as I know you are, if you are a true Christian—that is what I want to leave with you as a result of this final study of Romans 7. *The reason for your struggle is to teach you to rely not on yourself but on God, who raises the dead.* And what I want you to be assured of is that *he has already delivered you from "deadly peril," and that he will deliver you again.*

Deliverance from Sin's Penalty

The deliverance from sin provided for us by God through Jesus Christ is in three stages, and the first is deliverance from sin's penalty, that is, from the judgment and wrath of God due us as the result of our being sinners. This is not the deliverance spoken of in Romans 7:25, but it is foundational, and Paul discussed it carefully in the opening chapters of the letter. It is upon this foundation that all further deliverance is built.

In a book of sermon illustrations H. A. Ironside tells of a young man who was the son of a friend of Czar Nicholas the First of Russia. He had been given the job of exchequer of a border fortress of the Russian Army, a responsible position in which he was to manage the czar's money and dispense wages to the troops. But the young man fell into gambling and began to cover his losses by borrowing little by little from the army treasury. One day he received notice that a government auditor was arriving to examine the books, so he sat down and added up what he had taken. It was a huge amount. He emptied out his own meager

resources, subtracted that from what should have been in the government account and noted the great discrepancy. He then wrote under the amount due: "A great debt; who can pay?"

The young man knew it was impossible for him to make up the amount, and he did not know anyone who could be counted on to help him. So, rather than await arrest, trial, and disgrace, he drew his revolver and determined that he would kill himself upon the stroke of midnight. As he waited for the clock to strike, reflecting on how he had wasted his great opportunity, he became drowsy and drifted off to sleep.

It so happened that on that very night Czar Nicholas, dressed like a common soldier, entered the fortress to make an inspection of the battlements. According to regulations, every light should have been out. But when he passed the office of the exchequer, where the son of his friend was dozing, he noticed that the light was on and went in. There were the sleeping young man, the revolver, the open books, the total that was missing, and the cryptic note. It was all quite clear. The young officer had betrayed his trust. He had been stealing systematically for months.

At first the czar thought to awaken him and place him under arrest. But he felt sorry for the young man, and he remembered the father, his friend, and how brokenhearted he would be if his son were to be arrested. So, instead of proceeding harshly, he stooped over and wrote something below the young man's pathetic summation and went out.

The soldier slept for hours when suddenly, awakened by some noise, he sprang to his feet. It was long past midnight. He grabbed the revolver, pointed it to his head, and was about to pull the trigger when his eyes glanced down at the papers before him and he saw what had been written. Beneath his question, "A great debt; who can pay?" there was a single word: "Nicholas." Could it be? Had the czar been present? He sprang to some files where there were documents containing the czar's signature and made a careful comparison. The signature was authentic. "The czar has been here," he said to himself. "He has seen the papers; he knows what I have done; he knows my guilt, but he has undertaken

to pay the debt himself." So instead of taking his life the young soldier waited for morning when, as he anticipated, a sack of gold coins arrived from Nicholas. The young man placed it in the safe, and when the inspector arrived for the audit the sack was found to contain exactly the amount needed.

If you are a Christian, that is how Jesus Christ has delivered you from the penalty of your sin.
You are guilty of transgressing the law of God and of trampling God's honor. You deserve to die. But Jesus has made payment for your transgressions. Only in your case the payment he made was not merely a sack of gold coins to balance out a finite monetary account but rather his very life, given in exchange for yours. Jesus died so that you might be delivered from sin's penalty.

Who can pay? Jesus! And he has!

Deliverance from Sin's Power

The second deliverance from sin provided for the believer by God through the work of Christ is from sin's power, that is, from constant defeat by sin in our struggles against it day by day. In my opinion, neither is this what Romans 7:25 is talking about primarily. The deliverance spoken of in our text is a future deliverance, not a present one. But present deliverance has bearing in this context, since Paul has been speaking of his present struggles against sin in chapter 7 and is going to talk about a present (as well as future) deliverance in chapter 8.

How does this present deliverance work out? To answer that, let me go back over some of the things we have already seen about the Christian life in Romans 5 through 7.

1. *We are sinners and will continue to be sinners throughout our Christian lives.* It follows from this that the Christian life will always be a struggle. That is not what we want to hear, of course. We want things to be easy. Nevertheless, if we study the Bible, we find that this is taught from beginning to end.

We find it by example, as when we think of an outstanding character like Job, who had God's own testimony that he was a righteous man. When Satan appeared before God, God called attention to Job, saying, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). Yet this is not what Job thought of himself. Job did not say, "Look at what a righteous man I am," even though he knew there could be no direct correspondence between his sins and the enormity of the tragedies he suffered. Instead, when he stood before God he said, "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 40:4; 42:5-6).

David is another example, and not just in the period following his sin with Bathsheba. In the psalms he speaks often of his sins.

Isaiah, too, is an example. Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets. Yet when he had his great vision of God, recorded in Isaiah 6, he said, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa. 6:5).

It is always that way. It is the Bible's exceptional people who are most conscious of their transgressions.

Again, we learn that the Christian life is a constant struggle against sin from the Bible's explicit teaching in Romans and elsewhere. In Romans Paul will say, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world..." (Rom. 12:1-2), and "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Rom. 13:12).

Ephesians 6:13 says, "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 we read: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

These verses teach that the Christian life will be a struggle to the end and that the reason for this is that we carry the very root of the problem, which is sin, within our hearts.

Philip Doddridge, the famous eighteenth-century, nonconformist minister, said as he was dying, "The best prayer I ever offered up in my life deserves damnation." And Augustus Toplady, the author of the hymn "Rock of Ages" who reported those words of Doddridge, said, "Oh that ever such a wretch as I should be tempted to think highly of himself." These are not the words of mentally unbalanced eccentrics but of mature believers infused with the same Holy Spirit who filled Paul.

2. *In spite of our being sinners, Jesus died to save sinners, and this is what he is doing.* The point I have just made—that we will have to struggle against sin throughout our lives—is something we learned largely from Romans 7. But here we go back a chapter, to Romans 6, to the teaching that when Jesus died we died in him and that when he rose from the dead we rose in him. In other words, as a result of Christ's work on our behalf we are not what we once were. We have died to the past. We have been given a new and happy future. Therefore there is no other direction for us to go in this life but forward. Do you remember how I put it when we were studying these themes in Romans 6? I said, "There is no going back. That possibility has been forever eliminated. There is no direction for us to go but forward."

Paul puts it like this, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your

mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:11-14).

It is *because* Jesus has saved us from sin's penalty and is saving us from sin's power that we struggle against it. Yet it is because *he* is saving us that we can be assured of final victory.

3. *We have the assurance of victory, also expressed as the inevitable triumph of God's grace.* The third element in our present deliverance from sin's power is what we were looking at in chapter 5, to go back still another chapter, and what we are coming to again in chapter 8. That leads to the last of the three stages of deliverance from sin provided for us by God through Jesus Christ.

Deliverance from Sin's Presence

When we were considering our deliverance from sin's *penalty* and our deliverance from sin's *power,* I said that Romans 7:25, our text here, is not really about either of those two deliverances, though, in the first case, deliverance from sin's penalty is foundational and, in the second case, there is a measure of overlapping. However, when we talk about deliverance from sin's *presence,* that is, about a future deliverance, we are right on.

We remember that the apostle has been describing his present struggle against sin, emphasizing that we can never hope to be entirely free from struggling against sin in this life. Moreover, he had come to the end of himself, so that he cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He then gives the answer, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The question—"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"—is in the future tense. Therefore, since the question is in the future tense, we must conclude that the answer should likewise be understood in the future tense, that is, not

"Thanks be to God, who *has* rescued me through Jesus Christ," but rather, "Thanks be to God who *will* rescue me through Jesus Christ."

In other words, the deliverance Paul is looking for here is specifically a final deliverance from the very presence of sin, which has its hold on him now only through "this body of death," or "this dying body." Paul's final deliverance was to be through death and resurrection.

Let me add, before trying to wrap this up, that only this interpretation makes sense of the final sentence of the chapter. In that sentence, after having spoken of the victory that is ours in Christ, Paul returns to what he had been saying earlier, concluding, "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

If the deliverance of the first part of verse 25 were in the past (or even in the present), it would be a strange regression to conclude the chapter with a reiteration of the struggle Paul is describing.
He should have gotten beyond that by the victory that is ours "though Jesus Christ our Lord." However, if the first part of that verse is referring to the future, as I have suggested, the summation makes sense. For Paul is saying that, although he is assured of a final victory over sin, he nevertheless knows that he must continue to fight a vigorous battle against sin daily until he dies.

He has been saved from sin. He is being saved from sin. He will yet be saved from sin. But until the day of final deliverance it is his continuing responsibility to fight on.

The Winning Side

I conclude by pointing out that, although much of what Paul has written in Romans 7 sounds discouraging, it is not really discouraging at all. In fact, by contrast, there is enormous ground for genuine encouragement in what he says.

First, we are encouraged because the outcome of the battle against sin is certain. Our wrap-up of these themes has taken us back from chapter 7 through chapter 6 to chapter 5. But when we reach chapter 5, we return to verses that speak of the triumph of God's grace: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:20-21).

"Through Jesus Christ our Lord." That is exactly the place to which we have come at the end of chapter 7, and the point is the same. Victory is ours. The triumph of grace is assured, regardless of how badly we may think we are doing now or how near despair we may be due to the intensity or duration of the struggle. It is the very knowledge of a final victory that will enable us to fight on.

When the armies of Oliver Cromwell were winning battle after battle in the English Civil War, it was said of them that they could not lose because they knew, even before they started to fight, that God had given them the victory. I do not know how true that was of Cromwell's army. There were Christians on both sides of that conflict, and Cromwell's cause was not entirely free of base motives. But whatever the case with Cromwell's soldiers in those very human battles, the principle does hold true for us, the soldiers of Jesus Christ who are engaged in fierce spiritual warfare against sin.

Apart from Jesus, not one of us can prevail for a moment. But united to him, we not only can prevail. We will. The Bible promises that "he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

And there is this, too: Although your struggles may be prolonged and difficult, they are not essentially different from those of the many believers who have preceded you, including Paul and the other great personalities of Scripture. They triumphed, and so will you. Remember the text: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you

can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Part Nine. Life in the Spirit

Chapter 94.
The Greatest Chapter in the Bible

Romans 8:1-39

With the words above, Paul opens what I consider the greatest chapter in Scripture. It is precarious and probably a foolish act to call any one chapter of the Bible "the greatest," if for no other reason than one is likely to get caught in a contradiction. This happened to me as soon as I had announced this subject. A friend pointed out that in my first volume on *The Minor Prophets* (1983), I have already called the third chapter of Hosea "the greatest chapter in the Bible," and obviously Hosea 3 and Roman 8 cannot both have that identical distinction.

Besides, a person is likely to change his mind over time. What appears as the greatest portion of the Word of God one year may appear less important later, and another book or chapter may take its place. I remember that D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said on one occasion that for a preacher the greatest book of the Bible should be the one he is expounding at that moment.

All that aside, there is a sense in which the eighth chapter of Romans truly is great, even superlatively great, and it would be wrong to begin our careful studies of this chapter without acknowledging that and then presenting a general outline. F. Godet, the Swiss commentator, called these thirty-nine verses great because they begin with "no condemnation" and end with "no separation," to which another writer, C. A. Fox, added that in between there is also "no defeat."

Charles G. Trumbull, editor of the now deceased *Sunday School Times*, picked up on those earlier observations when he wrote:

The eighth of Romans has become peculiarly precious to me, beginning with "no

condemnation," ending with "no separation," and in between, "no defeat." This wondrous chapter sets forth the gospel and plan of salvation; the life of freedom and victory; the hopelessness of the natural man and the righteousness of the born again; the indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit; the resurrection of the body and blessed hope of Christ's return; the working together of all things for our good; every tense of the Christian life, past, present, and future; and the glorious, climactic song of triumph, no separation in time or eternity "from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord."

An old German commentator named Spener said that if the Bible was a ring and the Book of Romans its precious stone, chapter 8 would be "the sparkling point of the jewel." Many others have agreed.

How Many Sections?

It is not easy to outline Romans 8. The argument of the chapter is so carefully interwoven, with one thought following closely upon another, that dividing it into sections seems inevitably to be more or less "arbitrary," as Charles Hodge maintained. This probably explains the surprising variety of outlines scholars give. Hodge himself divided the chapter into six sections, as Leon Morris also does. Godet found four sections. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has seven (or eight) sections. John R. W. Stott has two main parts, the first divided into four subsections and the second into two, plus an opening, which he feels actually belongs with Romans 7, thus also making seven parts in all. The New International Version of the Bible has three sections and a total of nine paragraphs, which is a way of saying that the chapter could be treated in nine parts. Most commentators simply expound it as it comes.

Since we are going to be studying this chapter verse by verse, the way in which the verses are grouped is of little importance for us. Still, in order to give an overview of what the chapter is about, I want to suggest six divisions. These divisions follow Hodge and Lloyd-Jones most closely.

No Condemnation from the Law

We begin with verse 1. There is a sense in which this verse says everything the chapter really wishes to declare, for the sentence "therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" means that there is no condemnation now, nor will there ever be condemnation for those who are in Jesus. It is a statement of the believer's perfect and eternal security in Christ. But if that is so, then everything that follows in chapter 8 really follows. Above all, it follows that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

Verse 1 is the theme of the chapter, and the words "therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" are the triumphant cry growing out of the book's first half.

But why is there "no condemnation"? The first answer is that "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (v. 2).

Very few of us have a proper sense of what it is to be under the law's condemnation, but we can get a glimpse of what is involved through watching others' trials. One day Jim Bakker is riding high as leader of a national television ministry and extensive business empire. But the funding appeals are dishonest, gifts are wrongfully used, and suddenly Bakker is on trial for fraud and is declared "Guilty." The condemned man now faces a maximum of 120 years in prison and $5 million in fines.

One day Ivan Boesky is a wealthy New York stockbroker. But suddenly he is convicted of insider trading and is condemned by the courts.

For months we follow the story of southern California's "Night Stalker" with its horrifying revelation of murders, rapes, and burglaries. Then Richard Ramirez is identified as the killer, convicted of thirteen counts of murder and thirty felonies by a jury of his peers. And he is sentenced to death for his atrocities.

"Guilty" was our status, too, as Paul has explained in the opening chapters of Romans. We were condemned sinners, subject to the

outpoured wrath of God. But suddenly Jesus entered this world and died for us, bearing the wrath of God in our place, and there is now "no condemnation." The law tried to save us but could not. We had broken the law. The law could only condemn. But what the law could not do, God did through Jesus. Instead of condemning us, God condemned sin so that "the righteous commandments of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit." This is the argument of verses 1-4.

Deliverance from Our Sinful Natures

But we have not only received deliverance from the law's condemnation as a result of God's saving favor to us through Jesus Christ. We have also been delivered from ourselves, that is, from our sinful natures. The first deliverance (vv. 1-4) is from sin's penalty. The second deliverance is from sin's power over us, which is what verses 5-14 describe.

In my judgment, these verses are the most important of the chapter if we consider them in terms of the weakness of the church of Jesus Christ today. They tell us that if we have been saved by Christ, then we have necessarily also been changed by him. In other words, not only have we who have believed on Jesus as Savior been justified, we have been regenerated as well.

Therefore, if we are not living a new life in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, it is not simply that we are unfulfilled or defeated Christians. We are not Christians at all! As we will explore later, it is only "those who are led by the Spirit of God" who are the "sons of God" (v. 14). Many who are not living by the Spirit need to awaken to the fact that they are not truly Christians.

The other side of the picture is that, if we are so living, we can know that this is the Spirit's work and that it is another evidence that we are no longer under condemnation but have been saved forever.

Sons (and Daughters) of God

The Holy Spirit does not only change us, giving us a new nature and thus delivering us from our sinful former selves. The Holy Spirit also gives us a new standing before God, which is what the next section of the chapter teaches (vv. 15-17). What a standing this is! Before, we were slaves, wicked and condemned slaves at that. Now we have become God's daughters and sons, by which we cry, "*Abba,* Father," and confidently present our deepest questions, sharpest hurts, and most pressing needs to him.

Hope of Future Glory

Being a child of God means that we are also heirs of God together with Jesus Christ, God's unique Son. All that he has we have, and all that he experienced we are also to experience in some measure. This includes his sufferings, as Paul has said: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (v. 17).

But this suggests a great comparison to Paul. Share in his sufferings? Yes. But also in his glory, and "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (v. 18). In these verses (vv. 18-25) Paul lifts the matter of our redemption to a cosmic level, asserting that the restoration of fallen men and women through the work of Christ is only one part of what God is doing in salvation. God is redeeming nature, too, which means that he is saving creation from the decay it experienced as the result of Adam's fall in Eden.

What a tremendous revelation this is! D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

The radical defect in so many of us is that we are so subjective and always thinking of our particular moods and states. The Apostle Paul reminds us that sin not only affects us and our fellow human beings, it has affected the whole creation—the animals, even inanimate nature, everything is affected. God's work, God's creation has been marred. Sin has come in, and evil has polluted it all. We are to look at salvation and ourselves as a part of the glorious scheme which is going to renovate

the entire cosmos. And because God is going to do that to the whole cosmos he is going to do it to you!

This is yet another reason why there is "no condemnation" for those who are in Christ Jesus. By grace we have been caught up into this cosmic drama.

The Intercession of the Holy Spirit

The fifth reason that believers in Christ can be assured of their salvation and know that there can never be any "condemnation" is the intercession of the Holy Spirit: the third person of the Trinity interceding with the first person of the Trinity on our behalf (vv. 26-27). This does not mean that the Father needs to be persuaded to change his mind toward us, which some imagine either Jesus or the Holy Spirit doing. It means, as Paul points out, that the Holy Spirit interprets our prayers aright so that they are presented to the Father "in accordance with [his] will" (v. 27).

Have you ever tried to pray about something and been confused, not knowing exactly what you should pray for? I know I have. In fact, I find that as I grow older in the Christian life I am less and less certain of what I should pray for. When I was younger I had a more limited range of concerns and experience and saw only limited dimensions of a situation. Now I see more, and the situations in life for which I pray seem increasingly complex. In such situations it is good to know that, however I may pray, the Holy Spirit is constantly present to interpret my prayers correctly. I would not have it any other way. For whatever I may think I desire, in the final analysis it is not my will but the will of God that I want done.

The Purpose and Character of God

The final section of Romans 8, verses 28-39, is the greatest of all. Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls it an argument involving the very character of God. So, if salvation "fails with respect to any believer, the character of God has gone." Charles Hodge speaks of these verses as having two separate arguments: "the decree and purpose of God" (vv. 28-30) and "his infinite and unchanging love" (vv. 31-39).

Verses 29 and 30 contain what commentators have called a golden chain of five links, each of which points to something God has done for believers. They stress the sovereignty of God in salvation. The links in this golden chain of God's sovereign acts are: foreknowledge, predestination, effectual calling, justification, and glorification. Paul calls these acts God's fixed "purpose" for his people.

John R. W. Stott has a wonderful way of handling this last section, and I share it here even though we will come back to it much further on. He calls verses 28-39 "the invincible purpose of God" and divides the section into two parts, the first presenting "five undeniable affirmations" (vv. 28-30) and the second "five unanswerable questions" (vv. 31-39).

The "undeniable affirmations" are the unbreakable chain of five links, which I have already mentioned. Says Stott, "This working together for good, God's purpose in the salvation of sinners, is traced from its beginnings in his own mind to its culmination in the eternal glory." These verses comprise one of the grandest statements in the entire Word of God.

The unanswerable questions occur in verses 31-39:

1. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (v. 31). Many are against us. Christians have many enemies. But the question is not "are they against us?" It is "can they be against us?" That is, can they prevail. The answer, if God is for us, is "Obviously not!"

2. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (v. 32). Without the gift of Christ, we might wonder if God will give us all things. But since he has given us Jesus, what can he possibly be disposed to hold back? If he gave us the greatest of all gifts, he will certainly give all lesser ones.

3. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" (v. 33). Without the last word of that sentence, the earlier part would have some weight. Certainly there are many who could justly bring charges against us. Even our own consciences could do

it. But not against those "whom God has chosen." Paul is speaking of people for whom Christ died, who have therefore been foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. No charges can stand against such people.

4. "Who is he that condemns?" (v. 34). No one, as long as Jesus has died and is even now in heaven making intercession for us.

5. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (v. 35). In response to this last question Paul brings out all possible separators he can think of: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or the sword. He acknowledges the troubles Christians face: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered,'" quoting from Psalm 44:22. He reviews the sources from which such trouble might be imagined to come: death and life, angels and demons, the present and the future, any powers whatever—height, depth, anything in the entire created order. But having reviewed it all and having placed it next to the eternal and invincible love of God, Paul concludes rightly that nothing will be able to separate us from that love in Christ Jesus our Lord (v. 39).

Disappointed with God?

Someone sent me a book by Philip Yancey, a free-lance author and editor-at-large for *Christianity Today,* titled *Disappointment with God.* It grew out of counseling sessions the author had with young Christians, all of whom were disappointed with God and whose complaints boiled down to three accusations: (1) God is not fair; (2) God is hidden; and (3) God is silent—he does not answer prayers.

I am sure these accusations are genuine, and I appreciate Yancey's answers. He replies that "fairness" would send each and every one of us to hell; that God has unveiled himself as fully as possible in the person of the historical Jesus Christ; and that it is out of his periods of silence that God draws forth the precious perfume of human faith.

Yet what stuck with me most about the book is its title: *Disappointment with God.* For I found myself reflecting, particularly since I was beginning at the same time to work through this great eighth chapter of Romans, how any Christian could possibly be disappointed with God.

Disappointment with God? When he sent Jesus Christ to die for us so that we might escape his just wrath and condemnation?

Disappointment with God? When he sent his Holy Spirit to free us from our own sinful and debilitating natures and join us to Christ?

Disappointment with God? When he has made us his very own daughters and sons, with all the privileges that come from it?

Disappointment with God? When he has drawn us into a great cosmic drama of redemption, in which even the heavens and earth have a part?

Disappointment with God? When the Spirit intercedes for us, conforming our ignorant and incomplete prayers to the good, pleasing, and acceptable will of God?

Disappointment with God? When he has set in motion an invincible chain of saving actions, beginning with his affectionate choice of us in eternity past, proceeding through his
predestination of us to be saved from sin and conformed to the image of his own blessed Son, his
effectual calling of us to faith in Jesus as the Savior, and justification, and ending with glorification in which all the blessed purposes of God toward us are fulfilled?

Disappointment with God? When he has fixed such a lasting love upon us that nothing in all creation can separate us from it?

Disappointment?

Brothers and sisters, whatever are we thinking of? Or is it that we are not thinking? Or thinking only of ourselves? Perhaps our disappointment (if we have it) means only that we are unhappy because God has not done exactly what we wanted him to do when we wanted

him to do it, regardless of the fact that he has a much better plan for us and is actually working it out day by day, and will until the end of time.

The only sure cure for our unseemly disappointment is getting our eyes off ourselves entirely and onto God, who has done these great things for us. The best way I know to do this is by a study of Romans 8, which at least in this respect really is "the greatest chapter in the Bible."

Chapter 95.
No Condemnation

Romans 8:1-4

Having surveyed the entire eighth chapter of Romans in our last study, we return now to the beginning of the chapter, concentrating on verses 1-4. The first verse tells us, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This sentence is the theme of the chapter, as I said in the last study. Everything else flows from it. The rest of the chapter is basically an exposition of this one idea.

But verse 1 is not only the theme of Romans 8. It is the theme of the entire Word of God, which is only another way of saying that it is the gospel. Indeed, it is the gospel's very heart.

This means that it is what Paul has been explaining all along. In Romans 1 he spoke of the gospel, saying that he was not ashamed of it "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (v. 16). He spoke of the gospel again in Romans 3, adding that "now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known..." (v. 21). It is the same in Romans 5: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1), and "Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (v. 9). He ended that chapter by saying, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace

might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (vv. 20-21).

These are only a few of the many statements of the gospel that have occurred thus far in Romans, and Romans 8:1 is but another. Always it is the gospel. Paul seems never to have grown tired talking about it.

Ah, but we do! Many of us find the gospel wearisome and grace boring.

Why is that, do you suppose? Why are we so different from Paul at this point? I think it is because of what Jesus alluded to in speaking of the woman who anointed his feet with her tears and then wiped them with her hair. She had a sinful past, and those who knew it objected, saying to themselves, like the Pharisee: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she it—hhat she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Jesus answered by telling of a man who had been forgiven a great debt and who therefore loved his benefactor greatly. Jesus' point was that "he who has been forgiven little loves little" (v. 47). Isn't that it? Isn't it true that the reason grace means little to most of us is that we do not consider ourselves to be great sinners, desperately in need of forgiveness?

Four Great Words

We cannot appreciate or even understand what Paul is saying unless we recognize that we are sinners and that we have been saved only by the grace of God. This is taught by the four great words in verse 1.

1. *Condemnation.* I spoke about condemnation in the last study, saying that we have a hard time appreciating what this means because few of us have ever been found guilty in a court of law. "Condemnation," as Leon Morris says, "is a forensic term which here includes both the sentence and the execution of the sentence." But no human being has ever pronounced a sentence of "guilty" against most of us, and we think therefore that we are all basically fine people. We are not, of course. This is what Romans 1:18-3:20 has been teaching.

2. *Now.* "Now" is a time word, pointing to the change that has come about as the result of believers' entering into the justification that Jesus Christ made possible by his death. We stood condemned by God and were due to suffer the penalty of an eternal death for our sins, the "wages of sin" being "death" (Rom. 6:23). But that has been changed *now* because of God's great grace and favor to us.

3. *No.* This word is weak in the English translations. In our texts it is a simple negative, like most other negatives. In the Greek text "no" is strongly emphasized. First, it is not the simple negative *ou* but the compound and therefore stronger negative *oude*. Second, it occurs at the beginning of the sentence, which intensifies the negation. Commentators do not know how to render this well in English, but they write things like: "Not any therefore now of condemnation" and "Not only is the Christian not in a state of condemnation now, he never can be; it is impossible." It is a very strong statement.

4. *Therefore.* The fourth great word in this sentence is "therefore." To what does it refer? To the arguments immediately preceding this verse in chapter 7? To chapter 5 or chapter 3? Most agree that Paul's "therefore" is inclusive, pointing back to the entire argument of the epistle thus far. It is because of God's work in Jesus Christ and because of the application of it to us by the Holy Spirit that there is now "no condemnation."

God's Work, Not Ours

Here is a point at which we need to make sure we really understand what is being said. I have pointed out that there is no condemnation for us *because of what God has done.* But do we really believe that? Or do we still think that somehow, in some way, we are contributing to our salvation?

What Paul writes is that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That is, there are two classes of human beings: those who are *in Christ fesus* and who are therefore not under

condemnation, and those who are not in Christ Jesus and who are therefore still under condemnation. What he is promising is for those in the first class only. But the question is: How do we get out of the one class and into the other. Is this something we do? Do we earn it? Do we attain it "by faith"? If you have understood what the apostle has been saying up to this point, you will know that it is none of the above. It is because of God's work in joining us to Christ. This is what the last half of Romans 5 and almost the whole of Romans 6 is about.

Here I must deal with a manuscript problem. Those who use the Authorized or King James text will notice the addition of the words "who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" following the words "Christ Jesus" in verse 1. This is certainly an error, as even the famous Scofield Bible, which uses the King James text, acknowledges in a footnote. It is worth pointing this out because, if the clause is retained, it suggests exactly the opposite of what the text actually says.

In its corrupt form the text reads, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit" (KJV), which seems to be saying that if we continue to lead a godly life "in the Spirit" we will not be condemned, but that if we fail to lead a godly life we will be.

How did such a serious textual error come about? We do not know exactly, but it is not hard to imagine how this might have happened. For centuries before the invention of the printing press just prior to the Reformation, Bible manuscripts were copied by hand, and from time to time the copyists made errors, as we would have done ourselves. In the vast majority of cases the copyists were accurate. That is why we have such accurate texts today. Even where there are errors, we can correct them by comparing the errant copy with the multiplicity of other more perfect manuscripts. Still, mistakes were made, and this seems to have been the case here.

We can imagine a weary monk working his way through the Book of Romans, perhaps early in the morning when he was still sleepy or else late at night. He has finished chapter 7 and begins chapter 8, writing,

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus...." But at this point he either dozes off or perhaps, weary with the arduous work of copying, looks ahead to the end of the book to see how much more there is to do (he is only halfway through!). When he returns to his work his eye falls not on verse 2, where he should pick up, but on the latter half of verse 4, where he copies "who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." This is a mistake, of course, a serious one, but it sounds right to him. It flows grammatically. So he continues by copying verse 2 and the verses after it.

Does this mean that we cannot trust the Bible? No! There are only a handful of such problems, and besides, they are well known to those who work with Bible texts. They have been corrected. Nevertheless, in this case the problem existed for quite a long time.

What I am saying is that these words do not belong. If they did, our escape from condemnation would last only as long as our next faltering step or sin; then we would be back under condemnation again. Thank God, salvation is not like that! Salvation is from God. It is by God. What the text says is that there is no condemnation for whose who have been joined to Jesus Christ by God the Father through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity at Work

Let me repeat that last statement: *There is no condemnation for those who have been joined to Jesus Christ by God the Father through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit.* I repeat this because it is a Trinitarian statement—it speaks of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—and because it is precisely in these terms that Paul goes on to explain what God has done for us and why "there is now no condemnation."

Can you see it in the text? After his opening statement in verse 1, Paul has two explanatory sentences, each beginning with the identical Greek word *gar*, translated either "because" or "for."

The New International Version obscures this a bit, since it translates the Greek word as "because" at the beginning of verse 2 and as "for" at the beginning of verse 3, and because it divides the second of Paul's sentences (vv. 3-4) into two parts. But it is clear enough anyway. In verse 2 Paul says that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." In verses 3 and 4 he says that there is no condemnation because "what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering, [thus condemning] sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."

When you put together those two parallel explanations of why there is now no condemnation, you see that each of the persons of the Godhead is involved.

1. *God the Father.* What has God the Father done for our salvation? The answer is in two parts. First, God sent Jesus in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. Second, and by this means, God condemned sin in sinful man so that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in those who are joined to Christ.

Do you see now why I have called verse 1 not only the theme of Romans 8 but the very heart of the gospel? As Paul explains the basis of our deliverance, almost the entire gospel is presented in the next few verses. There is the doctrine of the incarnation, God's sending his Son Jesus to be like sinful man. The word *likeness* (v. 3) is important, of course, for it alerts us to the fact that although Jesus was a real man, which made him able to feel as we feel, endure temptation as we endure temptation, and eventually die, he nevertheless did not become like us in regard to our sinful nature. It is what the author of Hebrews means in noting that "we have one [high priest, that is, Jesus] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Paul's statement also contains the doctrine of the atonement. For his argument is that God sent his Son to be a sin offering. This picks up on all we learned about propitiation when we were studying Romans 3. God sent Jesus to die in our place and thus turn the divine wrath aside.

Finally, and by this means, "[God] condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit." This refers to justification, God's work of condemning sin in Christ so that we might be able to stand before God in his perfect righteousness, and to the necessary work of sanctification that follows justification for all who have been saved. (We are going to look at the nature and necessity of sanctification carefully in the next study.)

2. *God the Son.* What has Jesus Christ done for our salvation? We have already touched on this by noting that he became like us in order to become a sin offering. In the context of what Paul worked out in Romans 3, this has two parts.

First, as a sin offering to God, Jesus made propitiation for our sins. When we were studying chapter 3, I pointed out that this is a term borrowed from the world of ancient religion. It refers to turning the wrath of God aside. Many in our time have judged this to be unworthy of the character of God and say such things as, "As if his wrath needs to be turned aside! God is not angry, he is love." But this can hardly stand in any honest study of Romans. What Paul has been saying from the beginning is that we are all under wrath because of our wickedness. The wrath of God is precisely our problem. It must be dealt with. How? We cannot turn it aside. All we do serves only to increase it, since we accumulate wrath against ourselves constantly by every thought we have and everything we do. Only God in the person of his Son can turn that wrath aside, and this he has done by Jesus' bearing it in our place. No one who fails to understand and believe this can be a Christian.

Second, Jesus did a work of redemption. Again, when we were studying chapter 3, I pointed out that redemption is a term borrowed from the ancient world of business, just as propitiation is borrowed from the

ancient world of religion. It refers to buying something in the marketplace, and also to buying it *out* of the marketplace so it will not have to be sold there again. This means little if we think of it in regard to mere objects, but it means a great deal if we think of it in regard to people, especially slaves. To redeem a slave was to buy the slave out of the slave market so that he or she might be set free. This is what Jesus did for us. Paul touches on it in Romans 8 when he says that "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (v. 2). He means that he was once a slave to sin and death. But Jesus freed him from that, as he has all who have been saved by him.

3. *God the Holy Spirit.* The third person of the Godhead is brought into the picture in verse 2 ("the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death") and in verse 4 ("who do not live according to the sinful nature, but according to the Spirit").

What has the Holy Spirit done for our salvation? He has joined us to Christ, so that we become beneficiaries of all Christ has done. When we were studying this doctrine in Romans 5, I pointed out two things. First, that it is terribly important and perhaps the most critical doctrine of salvation in Paul's writings. Paul used the phrases "in Christ," "in Christ Jesus," "in him," or their equivalents 164 times in his writings. We can hardly emphasize this enough.

Second, this union is hard to understand. We recognize that this was true for those living in Jesus' and Paul's day as well as for us, because instead of simply explaining the doctrine in abstract language, both Jesus and Paul used illustrations.

Jesus spoke of it as the relationship between a vine and its branches: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit of itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.... Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5). He also used the image of eating and drinking, which we adhere to literally

every time we share in the Lord's Supper: "This is my body" and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:24-25).

In his writings Paul illustrates the concept by three very powerful illustrations. The first is the union of the head and the body, in which he compares the members of the church to the various parts of Christ's body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18). The second is the union of the parts of a building, sometimes described as a temple that has the Lord Jesus Christ as its chief cornerstone (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9, 11-15; Eph. 2:20-22). The third and most powerful illustration is the union of a husband and wife in marriage. Paul ends his teaching about marriage by saying, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32).

By joining us to Christ, the Holy Spirit seals our salvation and makes possible the great declaration of this chapter: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

No, Nay, Never

I think of a popular Irish folksong called "The Wild Rover." Perhaps you know it. It tells of a young man's restless days and of his return home, ending with the chorus, "No, nay, never; no, nay, never, no more will I play the wild rover, no never, no more." It makes me ask, "Can there ever be a condemning judgment for those who are in Christ Jesus?" I answer, "No, nay, never— no more."

Do you remember Jesus' teaching about eternal security in John 10? He was speaking of how he and the Father hold us safely: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:27-30).

When I was teaching John's Gospel I compared this to a carpenter who will sometimes join two boards by driving nails through them and then bending the protruding tip of the nails over sideways, embedding them

in the wood, thus clinching the nail. I said that this is what Jesus does. His first nail is the doctrine of eternal life, a life that will never end. But lest we fail to appreciate that eternal life really *is* eternal life, he clinches it by the explanatory words "shall never perish." Then he drives the second nail, that we are secure in his hands. In case we fail to appreciate that, he clinches this nail, too, adding that the Father also has us in his hands, that no one can snatch us out of the Father's hands, and that he and the Father are one.

In the same way, Paul teaches that "there is now no condemnation"—(1) because of the Father's work; (2) because of the Son's work; and (3) because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Now it is "no, nay, never" for those who are in Jesus.

But do not presume on this security. This is a great doctrine for those who truly are in Christ, but it is only for those who are in him. Make sure you are. If you are not sure, give the matter no rest until the Holy Spirit himself plants upon your heart the assurance that you really are Christ's.

Chapter 96.
The Christian Doctrine of Holiness

Romans 8:3-4

Our study of Romans 8 has brought us to the third and fourth verses. But if we can set those aside for a moment, I want to begin by a story drawn not from the eighth chapter of Romans but from the eighth chapter of John.

Jesus had come from the Mount of Olives, where he had been praying, and was met in the temple courts by a gathering of Pharisees and teachers of the law who had devised a scheme to trap him. They had caught a poor woman in adultery, and now they were bringing her before Jesus with a question: "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.

Now what do you say?" (John 8:4-5). It was a disgusting situation. The law required that there be two or more eyewitnesses to a crime, to the very act, and if this requirement had been met, as the leaders seem to have been claiming, the witnesses would also have had to see the man who was involved. That they did not bring him before Jesus suggests that he may have been part of this plot and that it must have been a set-up, a trap. In other words, these leaders did not care either for the law or the woman but were only intent on trapping Jesus, whom they hated.

It was a clever trap, too. Jesus was known for being compassionate, so he would be expected to forgive the woman. But if he did that publicly, Jesus could be accused of violating or disregarding God's law. What kind of a prophet would do that? He would be discredited as a teacher sent from God. On the other hand, if he condemned the woman, the leaders would laugh him to scorn and mock his words. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"? Oh, no! "... and I will kill you." They thought they had him in a box from which even God himself could not escape.

You know the story. Jesus fulfilled the law by demanding that all its requirements be met. Let those who witnessed the sin come forward and cast the first stones, as the law required. But let them be sure that they were not guilty themselves, which they would be, even of this crime, if they had been part of a plot to trap the woman. When the accusers failed to come forward, Jesus exercised the right to judge her not on the basis of the law, which she had indeed broken, but on the basis of his coming death for sinners—in exactly the way he saves us.

He asked the woman, "Where are they [the accusers]? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

He answered, "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin" (vv. 10-11). The King James Version says, "Sin no more."

No Condemnation

I tell that story because it is an exact illustration of what we find in the first four verses of Romans 8. The opening verse announces the great welcome news of freedom from condemnation for all who are in Christ Jesus. We have already studied this. It means that God has saved, and is saving, a great company of people by the work of Jesus Christ. We have the law. But, like the woman in John's Gospel, we are all unable to keep it. We are condemned by it. We cannot be set free from the law's condemnation by law, because the law is powerless. But what the law could not do, God did by sending his Son to be a sin offering. It is as if, in these verses, Jesus is saying to us, "Neither do I condemn you; go in peace."

But as we come to verses 3 and 4 we discover that it is not merely a question of our being delivered from the law's condemnation. Christ has delivered us from the law's power, too. He died to start the process of sanctification and not merely to provide propitiation from wrath, on the basis of which God has been able to justify believers from all sin. "And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."

In other words, to go back to John 8, Jesus is saying, "You are free from all condemnation, but you must now leave your sin."

What this is teaching is that justification and sanctification always go together, so that you cannot have one without the other. Justification is not sanctification. We are not saved because of any good we may do. If that were the case, Jesus would have told the woman: "Leave your life of sin, and if you do that, neither will I condemn you." But Jesus did not say that. It was the other way around. No condemnation! But *then* a holy life! Nevertheless, just because justification is not sanctification and sanctification is not justification, we are not to think that sanctification is somehow unimportant. On the contrary, according to Romans 8:3-4, sanctification is the very end for which God saved us.

By sending his Son to be a sin offering, God "condemned sin in sinful man, *in order that* the righteous requirements of the law might be fully

met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."

Let me back up and say this once again, though in different words.

1. *Two works.* In Romans 8:1-4 we have two great saving works of God. They are justification and sanctification. The first is deliverance from sin's penalty. The second is deliverance from sin's power. God accomplishes both for all Christians.

2. *Three agents.* In delivering us from sin's penalty and power, three divine agents are involved. God is the agent of our justification. It is he who pronounces us "not condemned." The Holy Spirit is the agent of our sanctification, since he accomplishes in us what the law was powerless to do. It is the remaining person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ, who makes both works possible by his death for sin. For Jesus not only bore God's just judgment upon sin for us in our place; he also broke its power over those who are joined to him by saving faith.

John R. W. Stott says of Romans 8, "In verses 1 and 2 the scope of salvation is stated: no condemnation, no bondage. In verses 3 and 4 the way of salvation is unfolded: we are told how
God affects it."

3. *One goal.* All this is directed toward one goal, which is that "the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the
Spirit."

What Paul says here is the equivalent of what he says in his letter to the Ephesians, another great doctrinal book, where he teaches that God saved us apart from good works precisely so we might be able to do good works. The pertinent text says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God —*not by works*, so that no one can boast. For we are God's

workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works,* which God has prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:8-10, emphasis added).

Four Important Truths

Because I have called this chapter "The Christian Doctrine of Holiness," what I need to do now is develop or unfold that doctrine. There are four important truths about "holiness" that we must examine.

1. *Holiness is justification's goal.* We could also say, since Jesus died to save us *from* and not merely *in* our sins, that the purpose of Jesus' incarnation and death was that all who are saved by him might live holy lives. God's sending his Son "in the likeness of sinful man" refers to the incarnation. "To be a sin offering" refers to Christ's death. Therefore, the incarnation and death of Jesus were so that "the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in" Christians. Stott says, "God condemned sin in Christ, so that holiness might appear in us."

We have the same idea in those important verses from Ephesians cited earlier, for there we are told that God has literally "ordained" or "appointed" us for good works. Ephesians is a great book about election, which is specifically taught in chapter 1. Then, in chapter 2, salvation is clearly said to be a result of God's choice and actions, rather than our own. So this is another case of God's appointing not only the ends but also the means to those ends. In this case, the end is good works. The means is our salvation by the work of Christ apart from human merit. In the language of Ephesians, God made us alive in Christ so that we might live for him. Or, as we can also say, he saved us by grace so that we might be gracious in how we treat other people.

2. *Holiness consists in fulfilling the law's just demands.* There are two errors to be avoided at this point. One is the error of the Pharisees. The Pharisees thought of themselves as being perfect fulfillers of the law. The law said tithe, so they tithed. They tithed not only their money but their goods, too, even down to the spices on their shelves. The law said keep the Sabbath, so they kept the

> Sabbath. They would not lift a finger to do even the smallest thing that might be construed as work. Yet the Pharisees were not righteous. They were self-righteous. Many were filled with pride, even to the point of hating those who were not like themselves. Their worst hatred was for Jesus, because his righteousness exposed their sin. Some of the most critical things Jesus ever said were about these people and their hypocrisy (cf. Matt. 23).

The other error is the exact opposite. It is a characteristic error of our times, the error of hedonistic Antinomianism. This view says, "What really matters is not the law but what I feel in my heart. So even if the law of God says that something is wrong, as long as I feel it is all right, it must be right. Or at least it is right for me."

Have you ever heard anybody say that? I am sure you have. It is the response made to moral demands by thousands of our contemporaries, many of whom want to be considered Christians but who really are not. They show they are not by their tragic disregard of God's requirements.

What, then, does fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law mean? The answer is in the word the New International Version translates as "live according to" but which actually means
"walk" (*peripateō*). This word portrays the Christian life as a path along which we walk, following Jesus Christ who goes before us. The path has a direction, and it has boundaries. The direction is the character of God, which is expressed in the law but which we see fully in Jesus. The boundaries are the requirements God's law imposes. We must not cross over these requirements. If we do, we are not on the path. We are not following after Christ. On the other hand, if we do follow, our eyes are not fixed on the law primarily—that was the error of the Pharisees—but on Jesus, whom we love and desire to serve by our obedience.

Can Christians sin? Of course, they can—and do. We all do. But there is all the difference in the world between stumbling on the path, getting up and then going on, and not being on the path of discipleship at all.

Those who are on the path may fall, but they are following after Jesus Christ and are never fully content unless they follow him.

3. *Holiness is the work of the Holy Spirit.* This is what we were studying at great length in Romans 7. Paul made two important points in that chapter. First, before his conversion he could not keep the law. He wanted to keep it, and at times he thought he had. But he actually could not. He was an impotent sinner. Second, even after his conversion he found that he was unable to keep the law of God *by himself.* He describes his struggle in this area toward the end of the chapter, showing that what he wanted to do he could not do, and that what he did not want to do he did. Paul discovered that it is only by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that he or anybody else could or can be holy.

This suggests two obvious conclusions. First, if we cannot live a holy life apart from the Holy Spirit and yet must do so, then we must keep close to God in Bible study, where God speaks to us, and in prayer, in which we speak to God. We must seek the Spirit's blessing.

Second, we must work at this relationship. We must remember that in Romans 6 Paul developed the key to holiness by saying that we are to understand what God has done for us in Christ and then base our entire lives on it, conforming our conduct to what we know to be true. He said, "... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Rom. 6:11-13).

Paul does not mention the Holy Spirit in Romans 6, but, as we now learn in chapter 8, it is only by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God that we can do this.

4. *Holiness is mandatory.* Once I was asked to do a series of messages on Christian discipleship, and the first question I dealt

> with was this: "Is discipleship necessary?" I began by explaining the way the question needs to be interpreted. It should not mean, "Is discipleship necessary if we are to be obedient to Jesus?" That is obvious. Nor should it mean, "Is discipleship necessary in order to live a full and happy Christian life?" That should be obvious, too. What the question should mean (and the sense in which I treated it) is, "Is discipleship necessary for one to be a true Christian? Can you be a saved person without it?" The answer I gave, the answer that should be given by any true Bible expositor, is, "Yes, it is necessary! It is mandatory to follow after Christ to be a Christian."

We need to speak in exactly the same way about holiness. When we say that holiness is mandatory, we do not mean that it is merely good to be holy, and we certainly do not mean that we can be perfect or ever reach a point where we will no longer be in danger of sinning. We mean that we must be on the right path. We must actually be walking according to the Spirit of God, if we are Christians.

Unholy People and Churches

What does that say about us? What does it say about the state of Christianity in the United States today? If holiness is necessary, as we have seen it is, how do we account for the unholy state of so many alleged Christian people and their churches?

George Gallup, the founder and president of the American Institute of Public Opinion, asked this question several years ago and set out to find an answer. He had been struck by the fact that nearly half of all Americans can be found in a place of worship on a given Sunday and that high percentages have high levels of conservative religious belief. He found that:

Eighty-one percent of Americans claim to be "religious," which places them second only to Italians, whose rating is eighty-three percent.

Ninety-five percent believe in God.

Seventy-one percent believe in life after death.

Eighty-four percent believe in heaven.

Sixty-seven percent believe in hell.

Large majorities say they believe in the Ten Commandments.

Nearly every home has at least one Bible.

Half of all Americans can be found in church on an average Sunday morning. Only eight percent say they have no religious affiliation whatever.

Most say that religion plays an important role in their lives. One-fourth claim to lead a "very

Christian life."

But although ninety-five percent say they believe in God and four out of five say they are religious, only one in five says that religion is the *most* influential factor in his or her life. Most want some kind of religious instruction for their children, but religious faith ranks far below many other traits parents would like to see developed in their offspring. Only one in eight says he or she would consider sacrificing everything for God or their religious beliefs. Gallup records "a glaring lack of knowledge of the Ten Commandments," even by those who say they believe in them. He observes "a high level of credulity,... a lack of spiritual discipline," and a strong "antiintellectual strain" in the religious life of most Americans.

Gallup investigated this anomaly and found that those large numbers of people who claim to be religious—fifty to sixty million claim to be "born again"—are actually a terrible distortion. Those for whom religion actually makes a difference are about one in eight, or twelve-and-a-half percent. But, and this is the striking thing, when he studied the life of these people, Gallup learned that they were much happier, had more stable families (there were noticeably fewer divorces), were less prejudiced, and were involved regularly, mostly on a weekly basis,

in some kind of service work for other people. And this was all by substantial percentage margins.

What does this suggest? It suggests that many who consider themselves Christians, even in socalled evangelical churches, are not Christians. They may profess the right things. They may lead seemingly acceptable lives, if we don't scratch too far below the surface. But they are not on the path. They are not following hard after holiness. They are not born again.

Isn't it time we had a true revival of religion in our churches? If you have studied the revivals of the past, you know that they have had three characteristic stages. The first stage is an *awakening.* By that I mean an awakening on the part of alleged Christians to the fact that they are not really
Christians. This is why the great eighteenth-century American revivals under the preaching of
Jonathan Edwards, William and Gilbert Tennent, and George Whitefield were called the Great Awakening. What impressed those who lived through such times was how the Spirit of God worked first to awaken many professed but counterfeit followers of Jesus Christ to their true condition.

The second stage was the *revival* itself, which meant the coming to spiritual life of these former mere professors. In England the corresponding movement was referred to as the Wesleyan Revivals.

Finally, there was an *impact* on society in which many people outside the church pressed into it to find out what was happening and were converted also.

We need such a revival in our time. And what we need to see, as a first stage of this revival, is the awakening of many so-called evangelicals to the fact that they have been Christians in name only, which is proved by their lack of concern for Christian doctrine and their lack of holiness. They must awaken to their condition.

Assurance? It is the theme of Romans 8 and a great doctrine for those who are truly saved. But it is deadly presumption if we are not growing in holiness by following after and obeying Jesus Christ.

Chapter 97.
The Carnal Man and the True Christian

Romans 8:5-8

In my first study of Romans 8, in which I surveyed the entire chapter, I said that in my opinion verses 5-14 are the most important of all if we consider them from the perspective of the weakness and need of the church of Jesus Christ at the present time. This is because they correct a mistaken but very popular understanding of what it means to be a Christian. This mistaken view, as we have already seen, divides people into three classes: (1) those who are not
Christians, (2) those who are Christians, and (3) those who are Christians but who are living in an "unsaved" manner. The latter are often called "carnal Christians."

Not long ago I received a book written by two of my friends that (rather uncritically, I think) assumed this mistaken notion. It was a book for laymen and was intended to help them mature as Christians so they could function as leaders in the local church. It encouraged them to move beyond being mere "Christians" to being "disciples" of Jesus Christ. At one point it said, "All followers of [Christ] are his sheep, but not all sheep are his disciples."

I have respect for my friends and applaud their intentions in this book. They are right in wanting laymen to assume their proper role in the church's life. But the problem lies in their procedure. They have adopted the three-category view, and this, I am convinced, inevitably leads the reader to think that—although it may be wise and perhaps even beneficial to become serious about the Christian life—becoming a "disciple" of Jesus Christ is, in the final analysis, merely optional. This conclusion is fatal, because it encourages us to suppose that we can be

careless about our Christianity, doing little and achieving nothing, and yet go to heaven securely when we die.

I suppose it is this that has bothered me the most, the idea that one can live as the world lives and still go to heaven. If it is true, it is comfortable teaching. We are to have the best of both worlds, sin here and heaven, too. But if it is not true, those who teach it are encouraging people to believe that all is well with them when they are, in fact, not even saved. They are crying, "Peace!" when there is no peace. They are doing damage to their souls.

Two Classes of People

We come to this problem in the paragraph of Romans 8 that begins with verse 5, because in these verses, for the first time in the letter, the apostle gives a careful definition of the "carnal" person. The idea occurs five times in verses 5-8 ("sinful nature" in NIV). It has already occurred three times in verses 3-4.

"Carnal" is a rather straightforward translation of the Greek word *sarx*, which means "flesh." But *sarx* is one of those words that has several natural meanings. Basically, it refers to the fleshly parts of the body, which is why "carnal" (from the Latin word *caro*, meaning "meat") is used to translate it. But the meaning quickly goes beyond this in Bible passages to refer to certain aspects of what it means to be a human being. One thing it means is to be weak. This is a characteristic Old Testament usage, as in the words, "All flesh is grass" (KJV; NIV has "All men are like grass," to convey the real meaning). To be "fleshly" also means to be human rather than divine. This is because "God is spirit" (John 4:24), and we are mere flesh. A third thing "flesh" means is to be sinful. This is the most important meaning of *sarx* in the New Testament. It is why, in Romans 8, for instance, the word is translated by the New International Version as "sinful nature." It means to be a merely sinful man, that is, man apart from the regenerating and transforming work of the Holy Spirit of God in salvation.

This is what we have to keep in mind as we study Romans 8. For what Paul is talking about here is the difference between those who are Christians and those who are not. That is, he is speaking of two kinds of people only, not three. Specifically, he is not speaking of how a "carnal Christian" is supposed to move beyond a rather low state of commitment in order to become a more serious disciple of the Lord.

The Carnal or Unsaved Person

What is it that most characterizes an unsaved person? These verses define the unbeliever in four important ways: (1) in regard to his thinking, (2) in regard to his state, (3) in regard to his religion, and (4) in regard to his present condition.

1. *His thinking.* The first verse of this paragraph concerns the unbeliever's thinking, telling us that "those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires" (v. 5). Here is a case in which the New International Version rendering of *sarx* by "sinful nature" has both a bad and a good side.

The bad side is this: When we hear the words *flesh* or *carnal*, most of us naturally think of what we term "fleshly sins," things like sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, a preoccupation with money perhaps, materialism, desire for praise from other human beings, pride, and other such vices. The term does include such things, and they are much of what the world sets its mind on. To replace "flesh" by "sinful nature" causes most of us to overlook these very things. We can forget that if our minds are set on these rather than on spiritual things, we are not Christians.

But the translation of *sarx* as "sinful nature" has a good side, too, because it frees us from thinking only of what we call fleshly sins. The word includes those sins, as I said, but it also includes many things that we do not associate with being fleshly. Take a very moral person, for example. He or she does not indulge in debauchery. Does this mean that such a person is therefore thinking spiritually rather than according to

the sinful nature? Not at all. In an unsaved state, the cultured, well-spoken moral person is as devoid of the Spirit of God, and is therefore as lost, as any other.

Paul himself was once an example. Recall how he summarized his early life in the great testimony passage from Philippians. He said that before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he believed that he was right before God. He describes himself as being: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:5-6). This is a portrait of a moral man. But it is no less a portrait of one whose mind was set on what his sinful self desired. What did Paul desire? He desired to prove himself to God, to prove that he was worthy of God's favor, to show that he could earn heaven. Nothing is so characteristic of the thinking of the unbeliever as this delusion.

2. *His state.* The next verse of this paragraph describes the state of the unbeliever. It is "death" (v. 6). Paul is not speaking of physical death, of course. He is speaking of spiritual death, and what he means is that the unsaved person is as unresponsive to the things of God as a corpse.

The Bible tells us that the power, wisdom, and glory of God are clearly revealed in nature: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps. 19:1). The unsaved person does not see this. He may use the word *God* at times, but the word does not really mean anything to this person. He would far rather believe that the universe came into being by evolution or chance or in any other way rather than being created by a God who demands a proper respect and right moral conduct from those he has created.

The unbeliever's condition is even worse when it comes to the truths of the Bible. Either he cannot understand them at all or else they seem utterly foolish to him. Why? It is because it takes the Holy Spirit to provide such understanding. The Bible says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for

they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones relates a classic case of this lack of spiritual understanding in an incident from the lives of William Wilberforce, the man who led the movement to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire, and William Pitt the Younger, who at one time was prime minister of England. Wilberforce was a Christian. Pitt was only a formal Christian, like so many others of that day. However, these two parliamentarians were friends, and Wilberforce was concerned for his friend's salvation. In those days there was a great preacher in London whose name was Richard Cecil. Wilberforce thrilled to his ministry and was constantly trying to get his friend Pitt to go with him to hear Cecil. Pitt kept putting Wilberforce off, but at last after many invitations Pitt agreed to go. Cecil was at his best, preaching in his most spirited manner. Wilberforce was ecstatic. He couldn't imagine anything more enjoyable or wonderful. He was delighted that Pitt was with him. But as they were leaving the service afterward, Pitt turned to his friend and said, "You know, Wilberforce, I have not the slightest idea what that man has been talking about." Clearly, Pitt was as deaf to God as if he were a physically dead man.

3. *His religion.* At first glance it might seem strange to speak of the "religion" of those who operate according to the sinful nature, since we have just shown that they are unresponsive to God. But strange as it may seem, the unsaved do have a religion. The third verse of the paragraph speaks about this. It tells us that "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (v. 7).

Not long ago I was reading an article in which the writer was speculating on the nature of things to come and in one place talked about religion. He used a phrase that struck me. He said that in the future we are likely to see a growth of "a *la carte* religion," meaning that people will choose the items they like from a potpourri of religions and then combine them to make their own comfortable little religious systems. I liked that description, because it struck me as something I

had already observed. I had noticed that in our largely irrational age it is a common thing for people to hold many mutually inconsistent ideas, the only force holding them together being their own individual attractions to them. But, as I have thought about it, it seems to me that this is what all religions already are in one sense. They are collections of human thoughts held for no other reason than that they are comfortable. They are comfortable because what they actually do is to protect their adherents from the only truly valid claims of God.

This is why Paul says that people in their unsaved state are hostile to God and why they do not submit to his law. The two go together. They do not submit to God's law because they are hostile to him, and because they are hostile to God they inevitably try to construct a religion that will protect themselves from him.

4. *His present condition.* The last thing Paul says of the unsaved, or "fleshly," individual is that a person like this "cannot please God" (v. 8). How could he, if he is hostile to God and is doing everything humanly possible to resist and trample down his just law? Pleased with the wicked? Of course not. God is displeased with unbelievers constantly.

Characteristics of the Christian

The apostle is not writing only of unbelievers in these verses, however. He is also writing of Christians, contrasting them with unbelievers. He lists two of the Christian's contrasting characteristics specifically.

1. *The Christian's thinking.* In verse 5 the apostle contrasts the unbeliever and the Christian in terms of their thinking, saying that the unbeliever has his mind set on what the sinful nature desires but that the Christian has his mind "set on what the Spirit desires." This is a profound way of speaking, for it eliminates many misconceptions of what it means to be a Christian while it establishes the truly essential thing.

First, it eliminates the idea that the Christian is someone who is merely very "religious." To be religious and to be mindful of the things of the Spirit are two entirely different things. The Pharisees were religious, excessively so, but they killed Jesus. Before he was saved, Paul was religious, but he expressed his religion by trying to do away with Christians. Ironically, one function of religion is to try to eliminate God, as we have seen.

Paul's way of speaking also eliminates the idea that a Christian is anyone who merely holds to right theological beliefs. Much popular Christianity makes this destructive error, suggesting that as long as you simply confess that you are a sinner and believe that Jesus is your Savior and "receive him," whatever that means, you are right with God and will certainly go to heaven. Do not get me wrong here. I know that there are degrees of understanding on the part of Christians and that many true Christians are yet babes in Christ, perhaps because they have never been given adequate teaching. Many might be unable to describe their faith in any terms more adequate than those I have just given. I do not want to deny that they are Christians. But what I do want to say is that it is possible to confess those things and still not be a Christian, simply because being a Christian is more than giving mere verbal assent to certain doctrines. It is to be born again. And since being born again is the work of God's Spirit, it is right to insist that those who are truly born again will have their minds set on what God desires.

Finally, Paul's way of speaking eliminates the idea that a Christian is someone who has attained a certain standard of approved conduct.

What, then, does being a Christian mean? It means exacdy what Paul says. The Christian is someone who has been born again by the work of the Holy Spirit and who now, as a result of that internal transformation, has his mind set on what the Spirit of God desires. If we are Christians, it does not mean that we have attained to this standard, at least not fully. But it does mean that we want to. Do you remember the illustration of the path? Being on the path does not mean that we have arrived at our destination. If it did, we would already be completely like Jesus. But it

does mean that we are moving along this path, that we are following Jesus, who is going before us, that we are trying to be like him.

Having our minds set on what the Spirit desires takes us back to verse 4, in which the purpose of God in saving us is spelled out as our fully meeting the just requirements of the law. That is what the Spirit desires, and if we are Christians, our minds will be fixed on doing exactly that.

2. *The Christian's state.* The second specific characteristic of the Christian is his state, described as "life and peace" (v. 6). It is the opposite of "death," which describes the non-Christian. The Christian is a person who has been made alive by God's Spirit. Spiritual matters make sense to him now. Before, he was dead in his sins; now he is alive to a whole new world of reality. And he is at peace—peace with himself, as he never was before, in spite of many heroic efforts to convince himself that he was. Above all, he is at peace with God.

The word *peace,* as Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, corresponds to the points of verse 7 step by step. "The natural man, the carnal mind, is 'enmity against God, is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.' But of the Christian, you say at once: 'He can be subject to it, he is subject to it, he desires to be subject to it, and he goes out of his way to subject himself to it.' He 'hungers and thirsts after righteousness,' he desires to keep the commands which God has given."

Signs of the New Life

I come to the end of this study, to the application, and it is very, very simple. Everything I have said is directed to one end only, and that is to have you look into your heart and take stock of whether or not you are a true Christian. I do not mean whether or not you are an exemplary Christian or a well-instructed Christian, certainly not a perfect Christian (no creature like that exists), but whether or not you are truly born again. Has the Holy Spirit of God made you alive in Jesus Christ so that your thinking, state, religion, and present condition have been changed?

More than two hundred years ago, when preaching in this country was vastly superior to what it generally is today, Jonathan Edwards wrote "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections" in which he examined the "signs" of God's gracious work in a person and attempted to distinguish between signs that are true and certain and signs that are not. His subheads in the first part of the essay read:

> Great effects on the body are no sign.
> Fluency and fervor are no sign.
> That they are excited by us is no sign.
> That they come with texts of Scripture is no sign.
> Religious affections of many kinds are no sign.
> Joys following in a certain order are no sign.
> Much time and zeal in duty are no sign.
> Much expression of praise is no sign.
> Great confidence is no certain sign. Affecting relations are no sign.

Edwards was convinced, no doubt rightly, that none of these things, as powerful or moving as they may sometimes be, in itself proves that the person is being acted upon by God, rather than by the mere emotion of the moment, or that the individual is saved.

What is a sure sign, then? The answer boils down to whether the person has his or her mind set on the things of the Spirit of God and whether this is moving, as it must, in the direction of a true righteousness.

Are you born again? Do you have a new nature? Have you passed out of death into life, from being dominated by the sinful nature to being controlled by the Spirit of God? If you do not know the answer to that question, do not let the matter rest until you know that you really are in Christ. Nothing in all life comes close to that matter in importance. Pursue it with all your strength. And if by the grace of God—perhaps through the application of his Word to your heart through this study—you realize that you are not yet a new creature in Christ, call out for salvation. Trust that, as God has been gracious in opening your eyes to

your true condition, he will also work in grace to bring you out of death into the utter newness of the Christian life.

Chapter 98.
Who Is a Christian?

Romans 8:9-11

A few years ago, at one of the early Philadelphia Conferences on Reformed Theology, John
Gerstner was speaking on the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins from Matthew 25. He was arguing that, although each of these women seemed to be what we would today call believers, only five were actually taken to be with the bridegroom when he came, which means that only five were saved. He pointed out that: (1) all had been invited to the wedding banquet;
(2) all belonged to what we would call the visible church; (3) all professed to have the bridegroom as their Lord; (4) all believed in the Lord's "second coming"; (5) all were waiting for Jesus; and (6) all even fell asleep while waiting. Nevertheless, five were not accepted. And when they cried to Jesus, "Lord, Lord, open the door for us," he replied, "I do not know you" (see Matt. 25:11-12).

The point of Gerstner's message was that professing Christians should examine themselves to see if they really *are* Christians, knowing that a mere profession of faith is not enough. The study was so powerful that a number of people told me afterward that they did indeed begin to wonder whether they had truly been born again.

Self-Examination and Assurance

Perhaps you began to wonder about your own state at the end of the previous study. There I was trying to show that (according to Romans) there are not three categories of people in this life— those who are Christians, those who are not Christians, and those who are Christians but live as if they were not—but rather only two types—those who are

dead in their sins and are therefore as unresponsive to God as dead people, and those who have been made spiritually alive by the Holy Spirit and are therefore following Jesus Christ in true discipleship. I acknowledged that Christians do sin, sometimes very badly. But a person who is on the path of discipleship gets up again and goes forward with Christ, while the unbeliever does not. In fact, the unbeliever is not on the path of true discipleship at all.

If teaching like this shakes you a bit, it is probably good for you to be shaken—particularly if you have been taking sin lightly. The Bible says that we are to examine ourselves to make sure of our calling (2 Peter 1:10). We should not be at ease in this matter. We should not rest until we are sure that we really do rest in Christ Jesus.

Yet we are studying Romans 8, and if you remember my introductory study, you will recall that the chapter's purpose is not to instill doubt in believers but rather the exact opposite. It is to give them assurance. Romans 8 teaches that if you are truly in Christ, nothing in all creation will be able to separate you from God's love (v. 39). I suppose that is why, having called us to examine ourselves by sharply contrasting those who live according to the sinful nature and those who live according to the Spirit (vv. 5-8), Paul continues by showing, in a most encouraging manner, who a Christian really is (vv. 9-11).

His outline is simple. He talks about the Christian's past, present, and future. The past is discussed in verse 9. The present is discussed in verse 10. The future is discussed in verse 11.

The Christian's Past

Verse 9 discusses the Christian's past. It is important, because it makes clearer than any other verse in this chapter the very point I have been making: that the description of those who are not controlled by the sinful nature but who live in accordance with the Holy Spirit applies to *all* Christians, not just to so-called spiritual ones. In other words, there is no ground for the doctrine of the "carnal Christian" here. Notice the apostle's ruthless logic: (1) if you do not have the Spirit of Christ, you

do not belong to Christ; (2) if you belong to Christ, you have the Spirit of Christ; and (3) if you have the Spirit of Christ, you will not be controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit. In other words, if you belong to Jesus, you will live like it. If you do not live like it, you do not belong to him, regardless of your outward profession.

But this is meant to be encouraging, as I said, which is why Paul begins the first sentence as he does. He is writing to the believers in Rome and says to these believers, "You, however, *are controlled* not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit." That is, he is assuming that these professed Christians really are Christ's, and he is trying to explain the difference their new identification with Jesus has made and will make in the future.

What difference has it made? Well, when we look to the past, which is what the apostle does first, we see that as Christians we have been lifted out of our former sinful or fleshly state and into the realm of the Spirit. We are now "in the Spirit," and, as Paul also says here, the Spirit is "in" us.

This is an absolutely critical thing, for it means that being a Christian is not merely a matter of adopting a particular set of intellectual or theological beliefs, however true they may be. It involves a change of state, which is accomplished, not by us, but by God who saves us. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "It is not that a man just changes his beliefs and no more. No, he was in the realm of the flesh, and he is now in the realm of the Spirit. He was dominated by the flesh before, and governed by it.... He is now in a realm which is governed and controlled and dominated by the Spirit." You and I cannot make this change ourselves. It is something God does.

Paul said the same thing in Romans 5, where he wrote that the Christian is no longer under the reign of sin unto death but instead has come under the reign of God's grace in Christ. The fact that it is "of grace" shows that God has done it.

This change also means that being a Christian is not a matter merely of living in a Christian manner either, important as that also is. If you are a Christian, you *will* live like one. That is what we have been seeing throughout our studies of Romans 5-8 and were discussing in the previous study especially. But living like a Christian, at least in an external, observable sense, does not in itself mean you are one. Many unbelievers live outwardly moral lives.

A Christian is someone who has been delivered from one realm, the realm of sin and death, and has been transferred to the realm of God's Spirit, which is life. This, of course, is something God has himself done, and it means that "salvation is of the Lord" and that it is all of grace. It is because of this—because salvation is of God and not of ourselves—that it is possible to speak of the Christian's eternal security, as Paul does. The only reason we can be assured of our salvation is because salvation is a work of God, whose ways are always perfect, whose promises are never broken, and who does not change his mind.

The Christian's Present

Verse 10 describes the Christian's present state, saying that "if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness." In some versions of the Bible the word *spirit* in this verse is printed with a capital 5, as if referring to the Holy Spirit, but this is certainly an error. The verse is referring to *our* spirit and should be printed with a lowercase *s,* as in the New International Version. It is a reference to our being born again.

The difficulty of this verse is with the clause "your body is dead because of sin." What does this mean? "Body" (Greek, *soma*) clearly refers to our literal human bodies, not to some "mortal principle" within us. But in what sense is this body dead, since our mortal bodies are in this life clearly alive? Some have taken "your body is dead" to teach that the tendency of the body to draw us into sin has been completely destroyed or overcome. I discussed this several times in my treatment of Romans 6 and 7, where Paul does speak of having died to the past and of having been made alive to God. But the difficulty with this view is

that in the earlier chapters it is the "self who has died, that is, the old self. And when Paul speaks of the body, as he does in Romans 6:11-14, his point is not that the body is dead but, on the contrary, that it is the source of our continuing troubles and struggles. We have to overcome it.

In view of this, it seems best to take "your body is dead because of sin" to refer to the fact that our physical bodies have the seeds of literal death in them and will eventually cease to live: "For the wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 6:23). Yet the contrast in verse 10 is the important thing. Although our physical bodies will die and are, in a certain sense, as good as dead now, our spirits have been made alive by the Holy Spirit whom the Father has sent to do precisely that.

What does it mean to have our spirits made alive by the Holy Spirit? Paul is talking about the present experience of the Christian, remember. So he means that by the new birth the Spirit has made us alive to things we were dead to before.

1. *Alive to God.* The first thing we have become alive to is God himself. Before we were born again, we may have believed in God. Indeed, the Bible says that only the fool does not. But God was not real to us. We had no true sense of who he was or what he was like. When we prayed— if we did pray—God seemed far off and unresponsive. However, when we were born again this changed. Now, although there is still much we do not know about God and although his ways are still often strange and puzzling to us, we do not feel that God is unreal. On the contrary, he is more real to us even than life itself. We know that God loves us and is watching over us. We trust his wise management of our earthly affairs. God is particularly close in sickness and sorrow. We know that in the hour of our death we will pass from this world to the presence of the Lord.

2. *Alive to the Bible.* We have not only become alive to God as the result of the Holy Spirit's work; we have also become alive to the Word of God. It is in the Bible that God speaks to us clearly,

regularly, and forcefully. Before we were born again, the Bible was a strange and closed book. Little in it seemed to make sense. We even found it to be boring. As Christians that has changed also. Today, when we read the Bible, we know that God himself is speaking to us in it. And not only does the Bible make sense; we know that it is true. Whatever the world may believe, whatever our nonbelieving teachers or friends may tell us to the contrary—we know that the words of the Bible pass the high standard of absolute truth and will endure forever, even when heaven and earth have passed away (Matt. 5:18).

We also find the Bible to be effective in our lives. We find that it changes us. We echo the words of Paul to young Timothy, when he said, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

3. *Alive to the Spirit of God in other Christians.* Finally, we have also become alive to the Spirit of God in other Christians. For just as the Spirit of God bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), so does the Spirit within us bear witness with the Spirit in other believers that we are fellow members of the one spiritual family of God and that these others are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I would suggest the following as excellent tests of whether a person is a Christian—whether *you* are a Christian.

First, is God real to you? I do not mean, "Do you understand everything about God and God's ways?" Of course, you do not, for you will never understand God completely. I simply mean: Is God real to you. When you pray do you know that you are really praying to him and that he is listening to you and will answer you? When you worship him in church, is it a real God you are worshiping?

Second, is the Bible a meaningful and attractive book to you? I do not mean, "Do you understand everything you read there?" Obviously you

do not. But does it seem to be right when you read it? Are you attracted to it? Do you want to know more?

Finally, are you drawn to other Christians? Do you want to be with them? Do you enjoy their fellowship? Do you sense how much you and they have in common? If God is not real to you, if the Bible is not attractive, and if you are not drawn to other believers, why do you think you are a Christian? Probably you are not. On the other hand, if these things are true of you, you should be encouraged by them and press on in following after Jesus Christ.

The Christian's Future

Verse 11 describes the Christian's future, pointing forward to his or her physical resurrection. It is true, as verse 10 has said, that the "body is dead because of sin." But although we die we shall all nevertheless rise again. The text says that "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

There are two common mistakes in the interpretation of this verse that we should not fall into. Lloyd-Jones discusses them. The first misunderstanding is that the text is speaking not of a future physical resurrection but of some kind of moral resurrection now. True, there is a kind of "resurrection" in which we who have been dead in sin have been brought into newness of life and are now increasingly putting to death the deeds of the body and living to Christ and righteousness. But that is not what Paul is thinking of here. The comparison between the resurrection of Christ and our own resurrection makes his real meaning clear. The point is that God will raise us just as he raised Jesus.

The second mistake is to think of this in terms of "faith healing," which some have done, supposing it to be a promise of perfect health for those who believe God will heal them. This idea is simply foreign to the context.

The verse is speaking about a future resurrection, and it is regarding it as certain for all who are in Christ. Indeed, it could hardly be stated with greater certainty, for in developing the point the apostle brings in each member of the Trinity, as if to say that our final resurrection is as certain as God himself. Earlier we had a statement relating to the deity of Christ. When Paul spoke of the Holy Spirit he spoke of him as both "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ" (v. 9).
Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. So these two verses together assert
Christ's deity. Here, however, it is not just the divine Christ but also the divine Father and divine Spirit who are in view. All three combine to guarantee our final resurrection. At the resurrection, being freed completely from sin's dread penalty, power, and presence, we shall be with God in heaven forever.

Such is the past, present, and future of the Christian.

Ironside and the Gypsy

Whenever I think of the past, present, and future of the Christian, as our text in Romans causes us to do, I remember an anecdote told by the great Bible teacher and former pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, Harry A. Ironside. It is told in his study of Ephesians 2:1-10, which provides a similar description of what it means to be a Christian.

Ironside was riding on a train in southern California one Saturday when a gypsy got on and sat beside him. "How do you do, gentleman," she said. "You like to have your fortune told? Cross my palm with a silver quarter, and I will give you your past, present, and future."

"Are you very sure you can do that?" Ironside asked. "You see, I am Scottish, and I wouldn't want to spend a quarter and not get my full value for it."

The gypsy was very earnest. "Yes, gentleman," she said. "I can give you your past, present, and future. I will tell you all."

Ironside then said, "It is not really necessary for me to have my fortune told, because I have had it told already. It is written in a book. I have the book in my pocket." The gypsy was astonished. "You have it in a book?" she said.

"Yes," said Ironside, "and it is absolutely infallible. Let me read it to you." He then reached in his pocket, pulled out his New Testament and began to read from chapter 2 of Ephesians: 'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.' "That is my past," he said.

The woman had been startled when he pulled the New Testament from his pocket and now tried to get away. "That is plenty," she protested. "I do not want to hear more."

"But wait," Ironside said. "There is more. Here is my present, too: 'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus....'" "No more," the gypsy protested.

"But," said Ironside, "you must hear my future, and you are not going to have to pay me a quarter for it. I am giving it to you for nothing. It says, '...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.'" By now the gypsy was halfway down the aisle of the train, saying, "I took the wrong man!"

We are dealing with a different text here, of course, and the specifics of the past, present, and future described in Romans 8:9-11 vary from what is said about them in Ephesians 2. But it is the same idea. Christians are

people whose past has been altered. Before, they were dead in sin; now they are alive in Christ. Their present has been altered, too. They have been awakened to the reality of God, the beauty of the Scriptures, and the presence of the Spirit of God in other Christians. Theirs is a whole new world. Finally, they have a changed future before them. For in time death will be overcome, and they will be raised in a new resurrection body, like the resurrection body of Jesus, and will be with God and Jesus Christ forever.

Are you a Christian? By all means, ask that question of yourself. Be sure of the answer. But when you are sure, be sure of this truth, too: that nothing in heaven or earth will ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and that your future will be even better than is your life with Jesus now.

Chapter 99.
Sanctification: The Moral Imperative

Romans 8:12-13

I once received a letter from an old friend whom I had not seen for four or five years, and it contained an old problem. Two years earlier she had begun to date a man who was not a Christian. At the beginning of the relationship, when she had raised the question of religion, he had brushed it off, claiming to be an agnostic. My friend reasoned that the relationship would not last anyway, so she dropped the subject. But the relationship did last. And now it was two years later, and she was in love with a man who was not a Christian and had no interest in becoming one.

Of course, she had prayed. But God had not answered her prayer by bringing the man to faith. And now she had a twofold problem. One was how to find strength to break off the relationship, which she knew she should do. The second was with God. Why was God not intervening to bring her friend to faith? The relationship mattered to her. She had prayed for his salvation. There seemed to be no other men around who

were Christians. What was wrong? In fact, in looking back over her life, she had begun to wonder if God had ever intervened in any special way to do anything just for her. And if he hadn't, why was she to assume she had a special relationship with him? Or, for that matter, why was she to believe that God was even there?

I think this letter expressed a very common dilemma, one you may have experienced yourself. Your specifics probably differ; the problem may be a job-related situation, a habit or sin needing to be overcome, some puzzling choice needing to be made. But the questions are the same. How can you do the right thing in your particularly difficult situation? And why doesn't God intervene in some way to work your problem out?

False Approaches to Sanctification

I want to suggest that the answers to those important questions are in the section of Romans 8 to which we come now, because in these verses Paul is talking about our obligation to do the right thing as Christian people. And he is implying—I am sure you will see this as we go on—that, as Christians, we not only have an obligation to live a holy life, doing the right things, but also the ability to live rightly. In fact, the obligation and ability are both grounded in the fact that we are Christians.

The place to begin this analysis is not with Paul's answer to how we are to live the Christian life, however, but by looking at a few of the inadequate approaches to sanctification that are often recommended in our day.

1. *A method.* In some circles what is recommended to believers who are fighting against sin, trying to live the Christian life, is a method. It may be a special approach to prayer or Bible study. It may be a special way of ordering one's daily life, or something else.

I do not want to be misunderstood at this point. Certain methods of organizing prayer, pursuing Bible study, and disciplining one's daily life are not bad. They may, in fact, actually be quite good. There is nothing wrong with keeping a list of items to pray for, or proceeding regularly

through some personal program of Bible study, or having certain times of the day or week that we devote to specific Christian activities. I regularly recommend such items, and others. But what I want to say is that a method does not in itself guarantee sanctification or give us strength to do the right thing in some crisis.

As an illustration, we can think of Martin Luther's experience in the monastery of Erfurt before his conversion. Monasticism was a method. It was the very apogee of method; that was its genius. But although Luther fasted and prayed and kept vigils and confessed his sin, often for hours at a time, he was unable to find either peace or holiness in such practices. Luther's deliverance came in a different way entirely.

2. *A formula.* A second approach to godly living, which many recommend, is a formula. You have probably heard of some of them: "Let go and let God," "Give Jesus control of your life," "Let Christ have the throne," or "Take it by faith." The appeal of formulas is that they are easy to grasp and for a time may seem to provide the solutions we are seeking. But they are too easy, too simple, and in the end they just do not work. In itself no mere formula is adequate for the harsh realities of human life.

3. *An experience.* Perhaps most common today is the recommendation that believers seek some life-transforming experience, often described as a "second blessing" or "second baptism of the Holy Spirit." This experience is supposed to mark a major advance in the Christian life, after which the discouragements and defeats of earlier days are replaced by a new experience of holiness, joy, and victory. Proponents usually think this idea is supported by Paul's teaching in Romans 7 and 8. In Romans 7 Paul is describing what seems to be a stage of life characterized by defeat in spiritual matters, but in Romans 8 he is victorious. What is the difference? Obviously, so the argument goes, the difference is an experience of the Holy Spirit, who is not mentioned in Romans 7 but is mentioned repeatedly in Romans 8.

> We are told that if we have this special experience of the Spirit, the victories of Romans 8 will be ours.

Unfortunately, as we have seen, this is just not the teaching of Romans 8. Paul does talk about the Holy Spirit in the chapter, but his point is not that this is an experience a defeated Christian is somehow to attain in order to become spiritually victorious, but rather that the possession of the Holy Spirit is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. This is not a *second* experience but an initial and determining one. Paul said it clearly in verse 9: "... if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." That is, he is not a Christian. The chapter argues that those who belong to Christ do have the Holy Spirit, and as a result, *they live like it.*

An Inescapable Obligation

What is the proper approach to sanctification, then? How are Christians to achieve victory over sin and grow in holiness? Paul gives the one and only adequate answer in these verses.

In some ways the most important word in verses 12 and 13 is the first, the word *therefore.* It points to what the apostle has just said. We have seen the same thing several times before. The first important occurrence of "therefore" was at the start of Romans 5, after Paul had explained the gospel in chapters 3 and 4. The word introduced the consequences of the salvation achieved for us by God through Jesus Christ, the most important being that our salvation is certain or assured. In fact, there is a sense in which everything we have been studying since (in Romans 58) has been a working out of that "therefore."

We saw this word again in Romans 5:12 and at the start of Romans 8. In each case it introduced a consequence following on what had previously been said. It is the same in verse 12.

Paul is arguing that Christians "have an obligation" to live according to the Holy Spirit, rather than according to the sinful nature. And the reason for this, which he has just stated, is that the Holy Spirit has

joined them to Jesus Christ so that: (1) they have been delivered from the wrath of God against them for their sin and been brought into an entirely new realm, the sphere of God's rule in Christ; (2) they have been given a new nature, being made alive to spiritual things to which they were previously dead; and (3) they have been assured of an entirely new destiny in which not only will they live with God forever, but even their physical bodies will be resurrected. These are things God has done (or will do) for us. We have not done them for ourselves; indeed, we could not have. But, says Paul, because God has done them for us, "we have an obligation" to live like God has lived. We must—it is an imperative—live for him.

Let me say this another way. Everything that we have seen in Romans 8 up to this point has been a general description of the Christian: his status, present experience, character, and future expectation. Now, for the first time, Paul draws a specific conclusion, saying that the work of God for us and in us presents us with a serious obligation. It is to live for God and not according to our sinful natures.

In these two verses the specifics of this obligation are stated negatively, though positive expressions follow. We are *not* to live according to the sinful nature, and we are *not* to give reign to the misdeeds of the body. Yet the positive side is implied. Instead of living according to the sinful nature, we are obviously to live according to the Spirit. And instead of giving reign to the misdeeds of the body, we are to put the sins of the body to death and instead yield the members of our body to God for righteousness.

No New Teaching

Does this sound familiar? It should. If you remember our earlier studies, you will remember that this is exactly the teaching found when we were studying Romans 6:11-14.

In that chapter Paul was teaching about our union with Christ, following up on his introduction of that doctrine in the second half of Romans 5. He was teaching that, if we are Christians, we have been united to

Christ in his death (so that his death becomes our death) and in his resurrection (so that his resurrection becomes our resurrection), and because of this union with Christ we are no longer what we were. We have a new status before God, and we are changed people. Therefore, he says, "... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... [and] do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

The key word in these verses is "count," or "reckon." It means to proceed on the basis of what is actually the case, in this case living precisely as a new creature in Christ because that is what one truly is as a Christian. When we studied these verses I pointed out that it is necessary that we do this. There is nothing else we can do. We cannot go back; our past is dead to us. The only direction we can go is forward.

This is exactly what Paul is teaching again in Romans 8. The only difference is that now his chief subject is not our union with Christ, which he was discussing in Romans 5 and 6, but rather the role of the Holy Spirit as the Father's agent in saving us. The Holy Spirit joins us to Christ. But this is the identical point! In other words, all Paul is doing in these chapters is approaching the subject of sanctification from two different directions. Yet, no matter what direction he comes from, the bottom line is the same. If we are Christ's, if the Holy Spirit has joined us to him, the past is dead for us and we must live now as what we truly are. To use Paul's words in verse 12, it is our "obligation."

Since Romans 8:12-13 are parallel to Romans 6:11-14, the earlier verses give an interpretation of the words "put to death the misdeeds of the body." They show that this means offering the parts of our body to God for righteousness rather than to sin.

"A Sin unto Death"?

I want to wrap up this study in a practical way. But before I do, there is one more matter that needs to be discussed. It concerns verse 13, which says, "If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die." What kind of a death is this? Is it physical or spiritual death? And, regardless of how we answer that first question, what would we actually have to do—how bad would we have to be—to experience it?

The most common way of answering these questions in evangelical circles is by thinking of this as "a sin unto [physical] death." The biblical phrase "sin unto death" comes from 1 John 5:16-17, in which John writes, "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death ['a sin unto death,' KJV]. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death." These verses are difficult, but they seem to be speaking of some one sin or type of sin committed by Christians that is so bad that God will take the offending person to heaven early by death rather than allow him or her to stay in it.

If we look for illustrations of this in Scripture, we may have one in Paul's description of people who participated in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. He wrote, "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 11:30). Paul seems to be saying that some of the Corinthian Christians died because of the way they dishonored the Lord's Supper. Another example might be found in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the church about the selling price of some land (Acts 5:1-11).

This interpretation is attractive to teachers who find the doctrine of the carnal Christian in Romans 8. For it seems to say that if a Christian is "carnal" enough, he may die physically, though, of course, he will not lose his salvation.

I want to repeat that 1 John 5:16-17 is a particularly hard passage to interpret. Various interpretations have been given. To see it as dealing with physical death for sinning Christians seems to be one good

possibility, though it is hard to reconcile this with the very next sentence in the passage, where John says, "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin..." (v. 18). If those born of God do not continue in sin, how can it be possible that any true Christian can sin so grievously that God would punish him or her by death? That, at the very least, is puzzling.

But even if 1 John 5 does concern punishment by physical death for some Christians, this is not an interpretation that fits the text we are studying. In Romans Paul is not talking about sinning Christians. He is distinguishing between Christians, who live by the Spirit, and unbelievers, who live according to the sinful nature. So his point seems to be rather that those who live according to the sinful nature, that is, unbelievers, will die spiritually—indeed, they are already spiritually dead—while those who live by the Spirit, that is, Christians, will live spiritually. Paul must be saying this, because it is what he has been saying all along.

Why, then, does he write as he does, saying to Christians, "For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die"? The answer is that this is a general statement, like saying to a child, "If you put your finger in the fire, you'll get burned." It does not necessarily imply that a person hearing the words might ignore the warning or even be able to ignore it.

May I put it bluntly again? Paul is saying that if you live like a non-Christian, dominated by your sinful nature rather than living according to the Holy Spirit, you will perish like a non-
Christian—because you are a non-Christian. "If you live according to the sinful nature, *you will die."* On the other hand, if you really are a Christian, you will not live according to the sinful nature. Instead, you will acknowledge what you actually are in Jesus Christ and live accordingly.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones concludes that here "the apostle teaches quite clearly that the way of sanctification is the way of realizing the truth about ourselves as Christians, and then putting it into practice."

"You Can Do It!"

Now let me apply this teaching practically. At the beginning of this study I told of a letter I received from an old friend and that it had two questions: (1) How can I find the strength to do what is right; and (2) Why doesn't God intervene in my life in special ways to help out?

I want to return to that letter now, having looked at Paul's teaching about the way to
sanctification, and share how I answered it. I called my friend, and after I had asked how she was doing—finding, incidentally, that she was doing remarkably well—I said something like this:

I am sure you will find strength to do what is right in this situation, and the reason I am sure you will find strength is that I know you already have it. You can do it! I do not mean that you have the necessary strength or willpower in yourself, because none of us do. We can't do anything by ourselves or in our own strength. The reason I know you have the strength you need is that you have the Holy Spirit, which is true of every Christian. The reason you are troubled by the need to do right and are not willing simply to drift along in wrong living, as unbelievers do, is that you know you belong to Jesus Christ and therefore really want to please him. God's Spirit is within you. So if you were to say, "I don't have the strength to serve God," you would really be saying that the Holy Spirit is inadequate.

And that is the answer to your other question, too. You want to know why God has not intervened in your life to do something special. I have heard many people ask that question—it is a natural one, particularly since we read about special interventions by God in people's lives in the Bible and in Christian biographies.

But what do we mean when we ask that question?

Do we mean that we want God to reorder events to suit our own personal wishes? If so, we have no right to ask that, nor should we want

to. That would mean that we know better than God, that we can order the events of our lives better than he can. That would be terrible.

Or do we mean—I think this is actually the case—that we want God to solve our problem by some external means, perhaps by removing the temptation, by changing our thinking so that we are no longer attracted by the wrong, or by providing an experience that will strip the temptation of its power? But if God were to do that, which he could, it would mean that what we are able to do as normal Christians unaided by some supernatural intervention of God does not count. And this would mean that the Christian life ultimately has no meaning. What would be the point of being a Christian if, in crisis situations, God always has to intervene in some way.

To be a Christian means this. First, God has already done everything necessary to save you not only from sin's penalty but from its power, too. You have God's Holy Spirit within you, and as a result you can live for him. You do not need some secret method, esoteric formula, or mystical experience. God has already equipped you perfectly for every good work.

Second, you *will* live for him. And not only will you live for him, putting to death the misdeeds of the body and living in accordance with the Holy Spirit's desires, your doing that will also matter profoundly. What would it prove if God did the hard thing for you? Nothing at all! We already know that God is all-powerful. But when Christians do the right thing—even when it breaks their hearts or when they suffer for it—when they do it in utter dependence on God and out of love for him, then their obedience to God proves everything. It proves that they matter and that God matters. And that victory, their victory and yours, will endure to the praise of our great God throughout eternity.

My friend's two questions probably occur to every Christian at one time or another. My response was helpful to her—I hope it also furthers your own understanding of sanctification.

Chapter 100.
The Family of God

Romans 8:14

One of the things I have said about Romans 8, as we have been working our way through it, is that basically Paul is not teaching anything new here but is instead reinforcing what he already stated. The general theme is assurance of salvation, but that doctrine was laid out in chapter 5. And, as I have explained, chapters 6 and 7 were a digression to answer several important questions growing out of chapter 5, after which the apostle picked up where he left off earlier.

But true as that is in general, we find something new when we come to Romans 8:14. This verse tells us that "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God," and here the idea that we are "sons of God" appears in Romans for the first time.

This is not merely an incidental thought, although it would be possible for a new idea to appear at some point simply by accident, as it were. There is nothing accidental about this reference. Paul is talking about assurance of salvation and is arguing that one basis for this is our new relationship to God, which is a family relationship. Moreover, having introduced the theme in our text, he then elaborates upon it in verses 15-17, speaking of such related concepts as "sons," "sonship," "children," and "heirs." Some of the words reappear later on in verses 19, 21, and 23.

The idea is so important that a number of commentators, such as John R. W. Stott, treat verses 14-17 as a separate section, in spite of the fact that verse 14 is linked to the preceding verse by the word *because,* or *for*.

Technically, verse 14 is introduced as proof of what has gone immediately before. Calvin saw this and said, "The substance... amounts to this, that all who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God; all the sons of God are heirs of eternal life; and therefore all who

are led by the Spirit of God ought to feel assured of eternal life." Therefore, Romans 8:14 is meant to be both a test of spiritual life and a comfort.

Verse 14 is one of those amazing verses, found often in the Bible, which is literally loaded with important teachings. I want to list five of them.

Two Fathers, Two Families

The first point is a negative one: *Not everyone is a member of God's family.* The reason this is important is that we have an idea in western thought, a product of older liberalism, which said that human beings are all sons or daughters of God and that therefore we are all members of one family. The popular way of putting this has been to speak of "the universal fatherhood of God" and "the universal brotherhood of man." I am sure you have heard those expressions.

There is a sense, of course, in which all human beings are brothers and sisters, having been created by the one God. This is the way the apostle Paul spoke in Athens when he quoted the Greek poets Cleanthes and Aratus to say to that particularly intellectual audience that "we are [all] his [that is, God's] offspring" (Acts 17:28). But that is not the way the words "sons of God" are used in Scripture, and it is certainly not the way the apostle is speaking here. When Paul writes of "those who are led by the Spirit of God," he is distinguishing between those who are led by the Spirit and those who are not led by the Spirit, which means that only a portion of humanity are God's *spiritual* children.

The clearest statement of this important truth is from the mouth of Jesus Christ. The relevant passage is John 8:31-47. Jesus had been teaching the people and had made a statement similar to what Paul has been saying in Romans: "If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

This offended his Jewish listeners, because they did not like to think of themselves as enslaved.

"We have never been slaves of anyone," they said.

Their statement was absurd, of course. They had been enslaved by many nations during their long history, and even then were under the domination of the Roman Empire.

But Jesus ignored that point and answered instead that he had been speaking spiritually. "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.... I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father" (vv. 34, 38).

They answered that Abraham was their father.

Jesus denied it, saying that if they were Abraham's children, they would be like Abraham and would not be determined to kill him, which they were. He said again that, instead, they were acting like their true father.

They then replied that God himself was their only Father, at which point Jesus became most explicit: "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here.... You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire.... The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (vv. 42, 44, 47).

It cannot be said any clearer than that. In these words Jesus made clear that there are two families and two fatherhoods, and that only those who love and serve God are God's children.

Born of God

This leads to the second important teaching of this verse. In fact, it is the main one: *All*
Christians are members of God's family. This involves a change that is radical, supernatural, and far-reaching.

1. *It is radical.* To become a child of God means that the individual has experienced the most radical or profound change possible. This is because, before a person becomes a son or daughter of God, he or she is not a member of God's family but is a member of the devil's family (to use Jesus' terminology in John 8) or is merely "in Adam" (to use Paul's earlier teaching in Romans). We do not need

to review Paul's earlier teaching in detail, because it was covered thoroughly in our studies of chapters 5 and 6. To be "in Adam" means to be in sin, a slave to wickedness, under divine judgment, and destined for eternal death. To be "in Christ" is the reverse. It means to be delivered from sin and its judgment, to be growing in holiness, and to possess eternal life. The change is as radical as passing from a state of slavery to freedom or from death to life.

2. *It is supernatural.* This change is not only radical. It is supernatural, too, which means that it is done for us from above by God. Here again we are helped by the very words of Jesus Christ, as recorded in John 3. He had been approached by Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, and had told Nicodemus that he would never be able to understand spiritual matters unless he was "born again."

This puzzled the Jewish ruler, so he asked, "How can a man be born when he is old?"

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (vv. 5-8). In these words Jesus made clear that becoming a child of God is a matter of spiritual birth and that this is something only the Spirit of God can do. The Greek word translated "again" implies that this birth is "from above," rather than from below, which means that this new spiritual life is divinely imparted.

3. *It is far-reaching.* This point will be developed more as we proceed through this section, but it is important to say here that the end of this spiritual rebirth is not only deliverance from sin's judgment—or, as many in our day seem to think, happiness now—but glorification. This is where chapter 5 began, and it is where chapter 8 will end. It is the point of this section of Romans: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs

with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (v. 17).

In his exceptional study of these verses, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones stresses that the apostle's interest "is always in glorification," bemoaning the fact that the interest of today's church has settled on sanctification "because we are so miserably subjective."

A Practical Result

Not every characteristic of our age is bad, however, though super subjectivity undoubtedly is a troublemaker. One potentially good characteristic is modern-day practicality. We are a down-toearth people and want to see results. So I ask, what is the practical result of this important change that has happened to us? What does being a Christian mean in one's daily life?

Here is where Romans 8:14 provides us with a third important doctrine: *To be a Christian means to be led by God's Spirit.* Up to this point the doctrines I have been explaining might be thought to refer to a change of status only—before, we were "in Adam"; now we are "in Christ." Before, we were under condemnation; now we are delivered from condemnation. Before, we were spiritually dead; now we are spiritually alive. All that is true, of course, and Paul has taught it. But it is not the only truth he is teaching. Because our change of status has been accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who lives within every genuine Christian, being a Christian also means that we will be led by that same Spirit. Or, as I have said in different words, it means that we will be growing in holiness increasingly.

This is the way verse 14 is tied to the preceding one. Verse 13 said that we will live spiritually, now and forever, "if by the Spirit [we] put to death the misdeeds of the body." Now verse 14 adds that we will indeed do that if the Spirit is within us, for this is the direction the Holy Spirit is leading.

A Test of Spiritual Paternity

From time to time we read in the papers of a "paternity suit," in which a mother sues for support of her child on the grounds that a certain man is the father though he denies it. In earlier ages this was a matter usually impossible to prove, which made a situation like this extremely difficult for the woman. But today a test can be made of both the alleged father's and the child's genetic makeup, and the relationship can be established (or disproved) with nearly 100 percent accuracy.

This introduces the fourth important teaching in this verse, which is, we might say, a test of paternity. It tells us *how we can know we are in God's family.* We are in God's family if the Spirit of God is leading us in our daily lives.

Do you remember what I said earlier about this being a new idea and a new section of Romans 8? Here I have to confess that it is not such a new idea after all, since we have really been noting this point all along. It is only another way of saying that those who are Christians will necessarily live accordingly. They are on the path of discipleship. Therefore, although they may fall while walking along that path, they also inevitably get up again and go forward. They grow in holiness.

A big question still remains: *How* does the Holy Spirit lead us?

People have a lot of ideas at this point, many of them unbiblical. Some answer in terms of outward circumstances, suggesting that God orders external events to direct us in the way we should go. Others look for special intimations or feelings or perhaps even special revelations. Some think of guidance almost magically, expecting God's Spirit to direct them to some verse supernaturally or to let them overhear some human remark that is actually from God. We have to
be careful in this area since it is futile to deny that God does indeed sometimes lead in "mysterious" ways. Saint Augustine was converted by hearing a neighbor's child singing the words, "*Tole lege* (Take, read)." He received it as a word from God, picked up a Bible and, turning to a passage at random, fell upon verses that spoke to his specific need, and so was converted. We dare not say that this was not from God.

But is that sort of guidance what we are to expect normally? If so, the majority of us have not experienced it. If being "led by the Spirit" is what it means to be a Christian, and if that is what it means to be led, then most of us are not Christians! Of course, this is not what Paul is saying.

The place to start is by recognizing that the Holy Spirit works within us or, as we might say, "internally." Everything in the passage indicates this. Paul has been talking about our minds being set on what the Holy Spirit desires and about our having an obligation to live according to the Spirit rather than according to the sinful nature. In the next verses he will speak of an internal witness of the Spirit by which we instinctively call God "Father." God can order external events, of course, and he does. He orders everything. But that is not what is being discussed here. In this verse Paul is talking about what God's Spirit does internally within the Christian.

So we reduce the earlier question to this one: What does the Holy Spirit do internally in Christians to lead them? Let me suggest three things.

1. *He renews our minds.* The first area in which the Holy Spirit works is the intellect, and he does this by what Paul will later call "the renewing of your mind." This comes out very clearly in Romans 12. There, having laid down the great doctrines of the epistle, the apostle begins to apply them to the believer's conduct, saying, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is —his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:1-2).

The person who discovers, tests, and approves what God's pleasing and perfect will is obviously is being led by God. But the key to this, according to Romans, is the mind's renewal.

How, then, are our minds to be renewed? There is only one way. It is by our reading and being taught by the Spirit from the Bible. That is what God has given the Bible to us for—to inform us, enlighten our minds, and redirect our thinking. I hold the Bible and the Holy Spirit together in this, however, as the Reformers were particularly astute in doing. For alone, either is inadequate. A person who considers himself to be led by the Spirit apart from the Bible will soon fall into error and excess. He will begin to promote nonbiblical and therefore false teachings. But a person who reads the Bible apart from the illumination provided by the Holy Spirit, which is true in the case of all unbelievers, will find it to be a closed and meaningless book. The Christian is led by the operation of the Holy Spirit and the Bible together.

Here is a test for you. Has the Holy Spirit been leading you by enlightening your mind through Bible study? Have you discovered things about God, yourself, the gospel, and the ways of God that you did not know before? Do you realize that they are true? Are you beginning to live differendy? Unless you are crazy, you will begin to live differently. Because a person who realizes that one way is true and another is false and yet takes the false path must be out of his or her mind, irrational. If your mind has been renewed, you will show it.

2. *He stirs the heart.* Figuratively, the heart is the seat of the emotions, and the Holy Spirit works upon it by stirring or quickening the heart to love God. In the verse that follows our text Paul speaks of an inner response to God by which we affectionately cry out, "*Abba*, Father." This verse does not actually mention the heart, but in a parallel text in Galatians Paul does, showing that he is thinking of the operation of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts explicitly. He writes, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, '*Abba*, Father'" (Gal. 4:6). In other words, the Spirit of God leads us by making us affectionate toward God and his ways. It is the Spirit who causes us, as Jesus said, to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6).

This brings us to another test of whether or not you are a Christian. I mentioned it in an earlier study. Do you love God? I do not mean, "Do you love God perfectly?" If you think you do, you probably do not love him much at all. I mean only, "Do you try to please God? Do you want to spend time with him through studying the Bible and praying? Do you seek his favor? Are you concerned for his glory?"

3. *He directs our wills.* Just as the Spirit leads us by renewing our minds and stirring our hearts or affections, so also does he lead us by redirecting and strengthening our wills. Paul speaks of this in Philippians, where he writes: "Therefore, my dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13).

God gives us a singleness of purpose—to do his will. It is the way God works. Has *your* will been redirected in that way? When you look deep inside, do you find that you really want to serve God and act according to his good purpose? God does not force you to be godly against your will. He changes your will by the new birth so that what you despised before you now love, and what you were indifferent to before you now find desirable.

John Murray had it right when he wrote, "The activity of the believer is the evidence of the Spirit's activity, and the activity of the Spirit is the cause of the believer's activity." If you are trying to please God, it is because the Spirit is at work within you, leading you to want and actually do the right thing. It is a strong reason for believing you are in God's family.

Our Brothers and Sisters

There is one more important teaching in this short but potent verse, and it comes from the fact that the words we are dealing with are plural: "*those* who *are led* by the Spirit of God *are sons* of God." Therefore: *Those led by the Spirit of God are our true brothers and sisters.* We are part of the same divine family.

The older, King James Version started this verse with "For as many as..." and I am almost sorry this has been changed, since it emphasized the inclusive nature of God's family better than "those" in the New International Version. Yet it is the same thing. And the problem is not so much our understanding the point as practicing it. There are many differences between believers within the church of Jesus Christ—differences of class, personality, background, economic status, temperament, abilities, drive, sensitivity, and thousands of other things. They have led to divisions in the church, for not all divisions (perhaps not even the majority) are doctrinal. Many divisions exist that should not exist, and sometimes these lead Christians in one camp to suspect and even fail to associate with those in another.

This should not be, for the text teaches that what makes other believers our brothers or sisters in Christ is not what denomination or movement they may belong to, but whether or not they are being led by God's Spirit. Anyone for whom that is true is our brother or sister in Christ, and we should recognize it and be willing to work with that person to fulfill God's purposes.

Chapter 101.
No Longer Slaves But Sons

Romans 8:15-16

We are continuing to study the section of Romans 8 in which, for the first time in the letter, Paul introduces the thought of Christians being members of God's family. The section begins technically with verse 15 and continues through verse 17, though the phrase "sons of God" was introduced in verse 14 and the words "sons of God" and "children of God" are also used later. Paul's development of this idea makes these verses among the most important in the chapter.

It is important to see how they fit in. Remember that the apostle's overall theme in Romans 8 is assurance, the doctrine that Christians can know that they truly are Christians and that, because they are, nothing

will ever separate them from the love of God. The experience of assurance demands that we actually be God's children. For this reason I have stressed the need to test our profession. It would be fatal to presume in this matter. However, the chapter has not been written to make us uncertain of our salvation, but to give assurance of it, and that is where these verses come in. They give multiple and connecting reasons, one in each of the four verses, why the child of God can know that he or she really is a member of God's family. Robert Haldane puts it like this:

Here and in the following verses the apostle exhibits four proofs of our being the sons of God. The first is our being led by the Spirit of God; the second is the Spirit of adoption which we receive, crying, "Abba, Father," verse 15; the third is the witness of the Spirit with our spirits, verse 16; the fourth is our sufferings in the communion of Jesus Christ; to which is joined the fruit of our sonship, the Apostle saying that if children, we are heirs of God, and then joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

We looked at the first of these proofs in the previous study. We will look at the fourth in the next. In this study we will look at proofs two and three, adoption and the witness of the Spirit with our spirits, which belong together.

Adopted by God

We begin with verse 15: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, '*Abba*, Father.'" The chief idea in this verse, which is also a new idea, is "adoption," though this is obscured somewhat by the New International Version, which speaks of "sonship." But the Greek word is *huiothesia*, which means "to have an installation or placement as a son" and is the technical Greek word for "adoption" (the term used in KJV). Adoption is the procedure by which a person is taken from one family (or no family) and placed in another. In this context, it refers to

removing a person from the family of Adam (or Satan) and placing him or her in the family of God.

Adoption is related to regeneration, or the new birth, but they are not the same thing.
Regeneration has to do with our receiving a new life or new nature. Adoption has to do with our receiving a new status.

But first we need to back up and consider a problem. It comes from the way Paul uses the word *spirit* in this verse. You will notice that "spirit" occurs twice, once in the phrase "a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear" (KJV uses the words "spirit of bondage") and a second time in the phrase "Spirit of sonship [or adoption]." The question is: To what do these two words refer?

The word *spirit* can refer to either of two things in the Bible, either the Holy Spirit or a human spirit, or disposition. These two meanings, in various combinations, give us three possible interpretations of the verse.

1. Both occurrences of "spirit" can be taken as referring to the human spirit. Those who think this way believe that Paul is talking about a person's disposition or feelings in both cases and would interpret the verse as saying that we used to be fearful but that now, following our conversion and because of it, we have a cheerful spirit of adoption by which we call God "Father." That is probably true enough. But there are good reasons for thinking that Paul is saying something considerably more important in this passage.

2. The second possibility is to take both occurrences of the word as referring to the Holy Spirit. Martyn Lloyd-Jones does this, referring the first to the time in our lives in which we are presumed to come under the conviction of sin but in which we have not yet come forth into the liberty of the gospel. This is an important point with Lloyd-Jones, since it is linked to his interpretation of Romans 7:7-25. He takes over two hundred pages to expound this and other points in his treatment of Romans 8:15-16. Donald Grey Barnhouse also takes both occurrences as referring to the Holy

Spirit, but he views the "spirit of bondage" as the time in which the people of God, the Jews, lived under the law of Moses, that is, before the coming of Christ. John Murray refers both to the Holy Spirit but in a specialized sense, as meaning, "[You] did not receive the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of bondage but as a Spirit of adoption."

3. The third view is a combination of the two, in which the first word is taken as referring to the human spirit and the second as referring to the Holy Spirit. This is the view reflected in most translations, such as the New International Version, where the first "spirit" appears with a lowercase *s* and the second with a capital.

In my judgment, there is no question but that the second use of the word must refer to the Holy
Spirit, if for no other reason than that it appears in precisely this way in the parallel verse in Galatians: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out '*Abba*, Father'" (Gal. 4:6). However, it is not so easy to say what the first use of the word refers to. Clearly, it could refer to the Holy Spirit negatively, which is how Murray sees it ("You did not receive the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of bondage but as a Spirit of adoption"). But if we take the parallel passage in Galatians seriously and apply that context here, it seems that the bondage involved is bondage to the law and that the contrast is between that bondage and the grace and freedom from trying to serve God by the law, which came through Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 4:1-7).

Moreover, this interpretation fits Romans. For Paul has been talking about the Christian's former state—in which, being in Adam, we were enslaved to sin—and he has argued that we have been delivered from that former bondage by the Holy Spirit. Now he adds that this new state, which conveys freedom from bondage, also contains the privileges of sonship.

The word *adoption* is not common in the New Testament, being used only by Paul and that only five times (three times in Romans), and it

does not occur in the Old Testament at all, since the Jews did not practice adoption. They had other procedures, polygamy and Levirate marriage, for dealing with the problems of widows and orphans and inheritance.

Paul took the idea of adoption from Greek and Roman law, probably for two reasons. First, he was writing to Greeks and Romans (in this case to members of the church at Rome), so adoption, being part of their culture, was something they would all very readily understand. Second, the word was useful to him because "it signified being granted the full rights and privileges of sonship in a family to which one does not belong by nature." That is exactly what happens to believers in salvation.

Our Father in Heaven

I have spoken of adoption as giving the adopted one a new status. But "new status" may not be the best description of what happens. What is really involved is a set of new relationships—new relationships to other people, both believers and unbelievers, but above all a new relationship to God. When we speak of salvation as justification, we are thinking of God as Judge. That is a remote and somewhat grim relationship. When we think of regeneration, we are thinking of God as Creator. That, too, is remote. But when we think of adoption, we are thinking of God as our Father, which denotes a far closer relationship.

This is why the apostle says that the Spirit of adoption causes us to cry out, "*Abba*, Father."

It is important to recognize that our authority to call God "Father" goes back to Jesus Christ. It goes back to no less important a statement than the opening phrases of the Lord's Prayer, which begins, "Our Father in heaven..." (Matt. 6:9). Today we take the right to call God "our Father" for granted, but we need to understand how new and startlingly original this must have been for Christ's contemporaries. No Old Testament Jew ever addressed God directly as "my Father."

This has been documented in a thoroughly German way by Ernst Lohmeyer, in a book called
"Our Father," and by Joachim Jeremias, in an essay entitled "Abba" and a booklet called *The Lord's Prayer.* According to these scholars: (1) the title was new with Jesus; (2) Jesus always used this form of address in praying; and (3) Jesus authorized his disciples to use the same word after him.

No one would deny that in one sense the title of "father" for God is as old as religion. Homer wrote of "Father Zeus, who rules over the gods and mortal men," and Aristotle explained that Homer was right because "paternal rule over children is like that of a king over his subjects" and
"Zeus is king of us all." In those days "father" meant "lord," or "master," which is what all kings
(as well as fathers) were. The important point, however, is that the address was always impersonal. In Greek thought their God could be called a "father" in the same way that a king might be called a father of his country. So, too, do we call George Washington the father of our country. But the deity is never pictured as *"my* father" or *"our* father" in Greek writing.

The situation is similar in the Old Testament. Occasionally the word *father* will be used as a designation for God, but it is not frequent and it is never personal. In fact, it occurs only fourteen times in the whole of the Old Testament. God refers to Israel as "my firstborn son" (Exod. 4:22), and David says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Although Isaiah writes, "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father" (Isa. 64:8), in none of these passages does any individual Jew address God directly as "my Father." In fact, in most of these passages the point is that Israel has not lived up to the family relationship.

Thus, Jeremiah reports God as saying, "How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel" (Jer. 3:19-20). Similarly,

Hosea records God's words: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me..." (Hos. 11:1-2).

Moreover, in the time of Jesus the distance between the people and God, suggested by the detached reverence by which God was customarily addressed, was widening rather than growing more narrow. The names of God were more and more withheld from public speech and prayers. And the great name for God, the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), usually translated "Jehovah" or "Yahweh," was so protected that we do not know even today precisely how it was pronounced.

The reason is that it was *not* pronounced, and no indication of how it should be pronounced was given. Whenever the word *Jehovah* appeared in the sacred text, the vowel pointing for the word *Adonai*, which means "Lord," was substituted for the vowel pointing of the divine name. This was to remind readers to say "Adonai" instead of "Jehovah," which is what they did. God was considered to be too transcendent to be directly addressed, and his name was considered too holy to be on human lips. So the distance between God and man continued to grow wider.

All this was completely overturned by Jesus Christ. He always called God "Father," and this fact must have impressed itself in an extraordinary way upon the disciples. Not only do all four of the Gospels record that Jesus used this address, but they report that he did so in all his prayers. The only exception—the cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34)—enforces the importance of this point. That prayer was wrung from Christ's lips at the moment in which he was made sin for us and in which the relationship he had with his Father was in some measure temporarily broken. At all other times Jesus boldly assumed a relationship to God that was considered to be highly irreverent or even blasphemous by his contemporaries.

This is of great significance for our prayers. Jesus was the Son of God in a unique sense, and God was uniquely his Father. He came to God in prayer as God's unique Son. We are not like him. Nevertheless, Jesus

revealed that this same relationship can be enjoyed by all who believe on him, all whose sins are removed by his suffering. They can come to God as God's children. God can be their own personal Father.

But even this is not all. When Jesus addressed God as Father he did not use the normal word for father. He used the Aramaic word *abba*, which is what Paul quotes in Romans 8:15 and the parallel text in Galatians 4:6. Obviously this word was so striking to the disciples that they remembered it in its Aramaic form and repeated it in Aramaic even when they were speaking Greek or writing their Gospels or letters in Greek. Mark used it in his account of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane ("*Abba*, Father, everything is possible for you," Mark 14:36). Paul used it in the texts we are studying.

What does *abba* mean specifically?

The early church fathers, Chrysostom, Theodor of Mopsuestia, and Theodore of Cyrrhus, who came from Antioch, where Aramaic was spoken, and who probably had Aramaic-speaking nurses, unanimously testified that *abba* was the address of small children to their fathers. The Talmud confirms this when it says that when a child is weaned "it learns to say *abba* and *imma*" (that is, "daddy" and "mommy").

So this is what *abba* really means: daddy. To a Jewish mind a prayer addressing God as daddy would not only have been improper, it would have been irreverent to the highest degree. Yet this is what Jesus said in his prayers, and it quite naturally stuck in the minds of the disciples. It was something very unique when Jesus taught his disciples to call God "daddy."

Now let me back up to something I said in the previous study when I was trying to explain how the Holy Spirit leads us. I spoke of his work upon our hearts, producing affection or love for God. A good illustration is the story of the prodigal son. When he came to his senses he remembered his father, his affection was quickened, and he determined to get up and go to him. That is the attitude the Holy Spirit creates in our hearts to assure us that we are no longer the devil's

children but rather are God's sons and daughters. We now know that God is our loving Father, and because we know this we are drawn to him.

Witness of the Spirit

We come finally to the third verse in this four-verse section, a verse that gives another reason for knowing we are in God's family. It says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (v. 16). There is no question what the two "spirits" refer to in this verse. The first is the Holy Spirit. The second is our human spirit. But it is not so clear about what this third proof of our being children of God consists.

One thing is clear. There is a contrast between verse 15, in which *we* give testimony to this new relationship, crying "*Abba*, Father," and verse 16, in which the Holy Spirit *himself* bears witness. Verse 16 concerns the Holy Spirit's witness, which is separate from our own. But what is this witness? How is it separate from what Paul has already said (and I have been discussing)?

I know that what I am going to say now will be misunderstood by some people and that a few may even condemn it as being wrong and dangerous, especially some in the Reformed tradition. But what I am convinced this teaches is that there is such a thing as a direct witness of the Holy Spirit to believers that they are sons or daughters of God, even apart from the other "proofs" I have mentioned. In other words, it is possible to have a genuine *experience* of the Holy Spirit in one's heart.

Experience of the Spirit? I know the objections. I know that no spiritual experience is ever necessarily valid in itself. Any such experience can be counterfeited, and the devil's counterfeits can be very good indeed. But the fact that a spiritual experience can be counterfeited does not invalidate all of them.

I also know that those who seek experiences of the Holy Spirit frequently run to excess and fall into unbiblical ideas and practices. Every such experience must be tested by Scripture. But in spite of these

objections, which are important, I still say that there can be a direct experience of the Spirit that is valid testimony to the fact that one is truly God's child.

Haven't you ever had such an experience? An overwhelming sense of God's presence? Or haven't you at some point, perhaps at many points in your life, been aware that God has come upon you in a special way and that there is no doubt whatever that what you are experiencing is from God? You may have been moved to tears. You may have deeply felt some other sign of God's presence, by which you were certainly moved to a greater and more wonderful love for him.

This has been a very common experience in revivals. Martyn Lloyd-Jones illustrates it by many dozens of pages of revival-time teaching and testimony. While I believe he is mistaken in referring to this as a "baptism of the Holy Spirit," I nevertheless believe that he is correct in calling it a genuine and desirable reality.

If this idea is foreign to you or if it seems dangerous, perhaps you are not ready for it at this point. Let it go. You have plenty to occupy yourself with in what has already been taught in verses 14 and 15. But if you have had any of these intensely spiritual moments, perhaps in your quiet times or while sitting in a church service, thank God for them. Know that they do not replace any of the other things I have stressed. The Bible is primary. But rejoice that God also has a way of making himself so real to us that we are actually lifted up, even in hard times, and are assured by that spiritual whisper of divine love that we are and always will be God's children.

Chapter 102.
The Inheritance of God's Saints

Romans 8:17

Romans 8:17 introduces us to two important biblical ideas: suffering and glory. Or, as Ray Stedman says, "the hurts and hallelujahs." The verse begins with the glory, talks about suffering, and ends with glory again. The first statement is that children of God are God's heirs and co-heirs with Jesus Christ.

What a marvelous thing this is, to be an heir of God himself! Sometimes children hope fondly for what they might inherit from their parents, but quite often these very human hopes are disappointing. One of the richest men who ever lived was Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902), an Englishman who emigrated to South Africa for health reasons and there amassed a vast fortune through diamond mining. He died when he was only forty-nine, and in his will he left most of his riches not to his immediate family, much to their resentment, but to endow the famous Rhodes scholarships.

"Well, there it is," said his brother Arthur when the disappointing news reached him. "It seems I shall have to win a scholarship."

The French writer of the Middle Ages, Francois Rabelais, who was also a Franciscan friar, made the following will: "I owe much. I possess

nothing. I give the rest to the poor."

How different with God. God owes nothing, he possesses everything, and he gives it all to his children.

True and False Evangelism

There are certain things we need to know about our spiritual inheritance, however, and the first is that it is laid up for us in heaven, that is, in the future. This should be almost self-evident, but it is important to emphasize it in light of a certain kind of evangelism that has been developed in our age.

This evangelism says, "Jesus died to give you abundant life now, and this means that he has promised to provide all you either need or want. If you are in trouble, he will solve your troubles. If you are unhappy, he will make you happy. If you are discouraged, he will lift you up and give you a joyful and unquenchable heart song. Whatever your needs may be, Jesus is the provision for those needs. Tell him about them. Claim the answers to those needs by faith." In some of its more extreme expressions, this teaching has become what is called a "health and prosperity" gospel.

During their brief reign on religious television, Jim and Tammy Bakker preached this kind of evangelism. They taught that God would make believers rich and prosperous. Tammy said, "When I tell God what car I want, I even tell him the color."

Such a gospel forgets that Jesus came not to bring peace but a sword, and that his call to discipleship says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). It is why, in our text, Paul follows his statement that if we are God's children, we are heirs of God with a sober reminder: "if indeed we share in his sufferings." True Christianity is honest at this point. It does not deny that there are very important promises for this life—promises that God will be with us in trouble, provide an inner peace in turmoil, minister comfort when we are distressed, and never leave us. But the basic idea is not that we shall escape trouble here but rather be

given grace to go through it. And the blessings of our inheritance are almost entirely reserved for us in heaven.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "True evangelism does not offer some panacea for all the ills in our life in this world; it does not promise to make us perfect in a moment or set the whole world right. It says rather, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation; but fear not, I have overcome the world.' "

The Inheritance to Come

So we start from the truth that most of our rewards are in the future. But then we immediately want to ask: "Of what does our inheritance consist?" What will believers actually possess in heaven? There are a number of things that I call "lesser items," and then there is the greatest prize of all.

The Lesser Items

1. *A heavenly home.* The first thing that comes to mind here is the promise of a heavenly home that Jesus made to his disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion. He said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3). This is a place prepared especially for all believers, and it is guaranteed by no less an authority than the Lord of glory himself, Jesus Christ.

2. *A heavenly banquet.* In several of his parables the Lord spoke of a heavenly banquet to which his own are invited. In one story he told of a great wedding supper to which many were invited who later refused to come, and of how the master sent to unexpected places to find guests (Matt. 22:1-14; cf. Luke 14:15-24). In another parable it is a banquet prepared for the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). In still another it is a wedding feast to which five wise women are admitted and five foolish women are shut out (Matt. 25:1-13).

There are similar but passing references to other occasions of shared celebration.

These stories present our inheritance as joy and secure fellowship. We have a foretaste of these things in our observance of the Lord's Supper, which looks forward to the coming great marriage supper of the Lamb.

3. *Rule with Christ.* Another feature of our inheritance is that we will rule with Jesus in his kingdom. There is some difference among Bible scholars as to whether this refers to an earthly rule with Christ in some future age or to a heavenly rule only. But whatever its full meaning, there is no doubt that some important ruling authority is promised. Paul told Timothy, "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12). In one of his parables, Jesus spoke of servants who had shown their faithfulness during their master's absence being awarded cities over which to reign in the master's kingdom (Luke 19:11-27).

4. *Likeness to Christ.* One of the promised blessings, which means a great deal to me, is that we will be made like Jesus himself. John writes about it in his first letter, using language similar to Paul's in Romans 8. "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:1-2). It is hard to imagine a greater inheritance than to be made like the Lord Jesus Christ in all his attributes.

The Lord, Our Portion

In view of the magnitude of those last four items, why did I call them "lesser"? Because of the amazing and infinitely greater blessing that awaits us as "heirs of God."

Let me begin by reminding you of a grammatical distinction, namely that there are two kinds of genitives in most languages. One genitive is what grammarians call a subjective genitive, the other is what they call an objective genitive. Here are examples: "the love of money" and "the

value of money." In each case the words "of money" are the genitive, having to do with possession. In the first phrase, "money" is the object, since it is the thing loved. The person involved has a love for money. In the second phrase, "of money" is still the genitive, but here it is the subject. The phrase does not refer to an individual who values money. It speaks of "money's value," value that money possesses.

Now take another phrase: "love of God." Is that a subjective genitive or an objective genitive? That answer is that, in this case, it can be either. If God is the subject, the phrase refers to God's love for us. If God is the object, it means that we have a love for God. Since the words can have either meaning, the interpretation has to be determined by the context.

With that distinction in mind, let's come back to our text to the phrase "heirs of God." Is this a subjective or an objective genitive? Again, it could be either. If it is a subjective genitive, then God is the subject and the meaning is that we belong to God as God's heirs. He has fixed his love upon us and made us his heirs by grace. If it is an objective genitive, then the meaning is that we have God as our inheritance. This is the boldest of the two possibilities, but it is what I am convinced Paul is saying here.

Here are my reasons.

First, this is taught in the Old Testament, which Paul certainly knew and from which he often borrowed. It is true that the Old Testament often speaks of the land of promise as the people's inheritance. This was a literal, earthly inheritance, though it was connected with God's greater promises to the patriarchs and their descendants. The important thing, however, is that it is transcended by passages that speak of God himself as their inheritance. Psalm 73:25-26, for instance, says:

> Whom have I in heaven but you?
> And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
> My flesh and my heart may fail,
> but God is the strength
> of my heart and my

portion forever.

Or Lamentations 3:24, "I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'"

This greater reality was kept before the people in an interesting way in regard to the inheritance of the tribe of Levi, an inheritance given to them when the people invaded Canaan to possess it in the days of Joshua. You will recall that the land was divided tribe by tribe, along the lines specified by Moses even before the conquest. Each got its predetermined portion: Reuben, half tribe of Manasseh, Gad, Judah, Ephraim, the other half tribe of Manasseh, and all the others. Except Levi! Levi was the tribe of priests. They were scattered throughout the land in the fortyeight priestly towns, from which they were to serve the whole people in God's name. They had no inheritance because, as it was said of them, "the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as he promised them" (Josh. 13:33).

In the case of Israel, the land was certainly a good thing, promised from the time of Abraham. But the truly great inheritance was God himself. The purpose of scattering the Levites was to remind them of it.

Second, Romans 8:17 speaks of our being "co-heirs with Christ." That is, we inherit whatever we do inherit along with him. But as soon as we ask, "What does Jesus inherit?" all the items I mentioned earlier do not seem to fit. Jesus does not inherit heaven or a home in heaven; he has gone there to prepare a place for us. He does not actually inherit a kingdom over which he is to rule, though we can sometimes think of it like that; rather, he is already the ruler, the sovereign God. Similarly, neither the heavenly banquet nor his own character can rightly be said to be something willed to him or passed on to him by God.

What is Jesus' inheritance, then? The only thing that can properly be said to be his inheritance is the Father. This is what he had in mind in his great prayer just before his crucifixion. He prayed, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:4-5).

Christ's inheritance is the glory of God, which means the vision of, participation in, and enjoyment of God himself. This is exactly the flow of the thought in Romans 8:17. For having spoken of our being heirs and having reminded us that we must enter into our possession by the gate of suffering, Paul ends up again with glory, reminding us that "we may also share in his [Christ's] glory," which is the glory of God.

Third, elsewhere in his writings, although not here, Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit who is given to us as the "earnest" (or "deposit") guaranteeing our inheritance (Eph. 1:14; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5). An earnest is a pledge of something greater, but it is more than a mere document, bill of sale, or contract. It is a part of what is actually to come later. For example, when we buy a house we usually guarantee our intent to purchase it by making a prepayment of a small amount, a cash pledge of the greater amount to come. So, if the earnest of our inheritance is the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is God—as he is, being the third person of the Trinity—then the full inheritance must be God himself.

Robert Haldane, who often writes brilliantly on the deepest subjects, says at this point, "God is the portion of his people, and in him, who is 'the possessor of heaven and earth,' they are heirs of all things.... God is all-sufficient, and this is an all-sufficient inheritance. God is eternal and unchangeable, and therefore it is an eternal inheritance—an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled and that fadeth not away.... It is God himself, then, who is the inheritance of his children.... He communicates himself to them by his grace, his light, his holiness, his life."

If God is our inheritance, we can be assured of salvation, since nothing is going to move God. Nothing is ever going to dispossess us of our heavenly inheritance.

Looking Forward

All of this would be mere pie-in-the-sky if it did not have a practical effect on us, however. Yet that is precisely what it does have, if we truly believe this and are thinking this way.

Consider Abraham. The history of God's acts of redemption begins with Abraham when God called him out of his own country and sent him into a new land that he would show him, promising, "I will bless you... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:23). This calling contained the promise of a land, but it was far more than that. By promising a blessing to the nations through Abraham, God was also promising the Redeemer who was to come through his offspring. That promise was amplified throughout Abraham's long life, and it was this upon which Abraham's faith and hope fixed. This is why, when the author of Hebrews came to praise Abraham for his faith in the great chapter on the heroes of the faith (chap. 11), he says of Abraham, "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:9-10).

"Heirs" of the promise? Yes, but the promise was not earthly. It was a promise of great spiritual blessing to be fulfilled ultimately in heaven.

It is the same with all the other heroes of the faith in this chapter. This is the point of Hebrews 11.

"By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did," and God accounted him to be "a righteous man" (v. 4). Abel received no earthly inheritance. He was murdered for his righteous stand. But he received a reward in heaven.

Enoch was a preacher. He preached of judgment before the great flood, warning the ungodly of his day to repent and flee from sin to God. He preached for three hundred years, but he had no reward here. He was utterly unsuccessful. No one was converted, and when the time for the flood came the only ones who were saved were Noah, his wife, and their immediate family. Enoch pleased no one on earth. But he has this testimony: "he was commended as one who pleased God" (v. 5b).

What did Noah inherit? Everything he had was swept away by the flood. Yet the writer says of him, "By his faith he condemned the world

and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (v. 7b).

Isaac and Jacob lived with Abraham in tents, having no real inheritance here. But they looked to the future and hoped for that (vv. 20-21), though they sometimes did it badly.

Joseph lost his home and his freedom for righteousness' sake. And even though God later advanced him and made him second in power only to Pharaoh of Egypt, Joseph's hopes were not there. He hoped in God's promise, in proof of which he gave instructions that his body was not to be buried in one of the Egyptian tombs but was to be carried from Egypt to Canaan when God eventually led the people out of slavery (v. 22; cf. Gen. 50:24-25).

Moses had no love for earth's treasures. He sought no earthly reward. Rather, he turned his back on the riches of Egypt, regarding "disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (v. 26).

It was the same with all the Old Testament believers: Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Such heroes of faith "were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword.... They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, *yet none of them received what had been promised*" (vv. 35-39, emphasis added).

Not then! But they have received it now. They have gone before us to take possession of the inheritance prepared in heaven for God's saints.

"Joy Hereafter"

Why should we expect it to be any different for us? It will not be. So why, when all Scripture teaches that our inheritance is in heaven and not on earth, should we spend so much effort trying to amass our fortunes here? Or why should we expect our lives to proceed along a gentle

primrose path, when others gained heaven only by a sail through bloody seas?

I recently came across some wonderful words by Charles Haddon Spurgeon. They were written for preachers to encourage them to keep on in tough times, but the message is equally good for anyone. It goes like this:

Be not surprised when friends fail you: it is a failing world.

Never count upon immutability in man: inconstancy you may reckon upon without fear of disappointment. The disciples of Jesus forsook him; be not amazed if your adherents wander away to other teachers: as they were not your all when with you, all is not gone from you with their departure.

Serve God with all your might while the candle is burning, and then when it goes out for a season, you will have the less to regret.

Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are. When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed of being full, except in the Lord.

Set small store by present rewards; be grateful for earnests by the way, but look for recompensing joy hereafter.

Continue with double earnestness to serve your Lord when no visible result is before you. Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide.

Between this and heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our covenant Head. In nothing let us be turned aside from the path which the divine call has urged us to pursue. Come fair or come foul, the pulpit is our watch-tower, and the ministry our warfare; be it ours, when we cannot see the face of our God, to trust under the shadow of his wings.

Chapter 103.
Suffering: The Path to Glory

Romans 8:17

I do not think it was very good exegesis, but it was intriguing. A number of years ago a churchgoer asked a minister the meaning of the word *reproof* in 2 Timothy 3:16 ("All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for *reproof,* for correction, for instruction in righteousness," KJV). The minister replied this way: "It means proof of doctrine, and then proof and proof again—*re*-proof." As I say, I do not think that is correct. I think the New International Version is right when it translates the Greek word *elegmos* as "rebuking." Still there is something to be said for "re-proofing." In fact, it is what we have in Romans 8:14-17.

Several studies back, when we were in the midst of this section (at v. 15), I pointed out that verses 14-17 contain four proofs of our being sons and daughters of God, if the Holy Spirit has indeed brought us into God's family. First, we are led by God's Spirit. This refers to our conduct. If we are following after Christ in true and obedient discipleship, then we are Christ's and can be assured of salvation. Second, we have the internal witness of our spirits by which we cry "*Abba*, Father." We know that we have a new family relationship to God. Third, the Holy Spirit witnesses to us. I described this as an overwhelming sense of God's presence, something most Christians have experienced, though they may not understand it or know how to describe it. Fourth, we participate in Christ's sufferings.

These items are certainly proof and reproof, being four good reasons why a child of God can know that he or she really does belong to God and that nothing in heaven or earth will ever snatch him or her away from God's love or break the family relationship.

The Problem of Suffering

But why should Paul introduce the idea of *suffering*, of all things—and at this point? None of us would do it. If we were trying to assure Christians that they really are Christians and their salvation is secure, suffering is probably the last thing we would mention. We think of it in the "problem" category. Hugh Evan Hopkins wrote a book called *The Mystery of Suffering*. C. S.
Lewis called his book *The Problem of Pain*. Most of us are probably closest to Rabbi Harold S.

Kushner's approach when he titled his problem-solving book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

We Christians acknowledge the problem of suffering and sometimes wrestle with it. But few of us would think of presenting it as a proof that the suffering person is a true child of God. It would seem to be the other way around. So why does Paul drag the subject in here?

The first reason, surely, is that he was a realist. More than that, as an evangelist and a pastor, he knew that the people to whom he was writing were suffering. The early ministers of the gospel began to suffer for the gospel as soon as they began to obey Christ's Great Commission. Peter and John were jailed. Stephen was killed. Paul himself was imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked, starved, threatened, and exposed to the elements. And what was true of these early preachers soon became true of their followers as well. They were ridiculed, hated, abused, and eventually martyred for their faith in great numbers. In addition, they endured the many disappointments, deaths, deprivations, and disasters common to all human life in a fallen and extremely sinful world.

Read the New Testament with suffering in mind and you will be startled to discover how extensively it is mentioned. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33b). Most of the New Testament epistles have important discussions about suffering.

Suffering is as common to God's people today as in New Testament times. We need to understand that. It is true that most of us do not experience that special kind of suffering we call persecution, though our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world do. But we all know

suffering. We suffer when we lose a husband or wife or other family member through death. We grieve when life itself or our friends or children disappoint us. We groan under pain, trauma, and sickness. We are hurt by prejudice, poverty, or sometimes a lack of rewarding work. The list is endless. Realism and pastoral concern undoubtedly caused the apostle to introduce this subject. Honesty did not allow him to talk about our inheritance without at the same time acknowledging that the path to glory involves a cross.

A second reason Paul probably introduced the subject is that he must have been aware of the many non-Christian approaches to suffering that were around. They were around then, and they are around today. His words, though quite brief, correct the following non-Christian approaches.

1. *Anger.* One response to suffering is anger. This is common with unbelievers, who blame or even curse God for their misfortunes. But it is also sadly true of some Christians. They blame God because he has not done something for them that they wanted—given them a loving spouse, for example—forgetting that Jesus has not promised us an easy life here, much less the fulfillment of our desires. He has called us to discipleship. The glory is hereafter.

2. *Avoidance.* A second approach is avoidance. If the path before them looks hard or even undesirable, some people turn from it and try to find something easier or more rewarding. Or, if the path cannot be avoided, they try to balance it with other things that are more attractive. The ancient name for this approach is hedonism. The Christian form of it is to ask God to remove the undesirable thing—sickness, for example, particularly a terminal illness. Christians who take this approach think the correct way is to ask God to remove the sickness so that afterward they might praise him for the healing. Of course, it sometimes is God's will to heal, so it is not wrong to ask for healing. But this is not the most profound or uniquely Christian approach to suffering.

A special form of this approach is used in some types of counseling. There the bottom line seems to be the individual's personal happiness or fulfillment. People are advised to do whatever makes them happy or "feels good," which ignores the truth that real growth comes by working through our hardships rather than by avoiding them.

3. *Apathy.* The third non-Christian approach is apathy, detachment from the problem. It is the attitude that says, "It just doesn't matter," and then tries to think about something else. One form of apathy is stoicism, the philosophy of the stiff upper lip. Stoicism may help you get by, but it is joyless and far removed from Christianity.

Paul was surrounded by these non-Christian philosophies, just as we are today, which is why I suggested that a second reason he introduced the subject of suffering at this point was to counter them. For our part, we need to know that these approaches are all less than truly Christian and come to understand suffering in a different light. We need to know that, for the Christian, suffering is the arena in which we are to prove the reality of our profession and achieve spiritual victories.

In the title of the fifth volume of my studies of John's Gospel, I called the Christian approach "Triumph Through Tragedy." Of course, the key word is "through." We do not triumph by avoiding hardships.

Proof of Sonship

This brings us to the value of suffering according to a right theological framework or life-view. It has several important values, and the first is the chief reason Paul mentions it in Romans: He has been talking of Christians being sons and daughters of God; *now he speaks of suffering as proof of that relationship,* though the suffering may be in any of three different forms, each with a particular purpose.

1. *Persecution.* Some suffering is in the form of persecution, as I suggested earlier, and one value of persecution is that it proves to us that we really are children of God. Jesus taught this many times. In the Sermon on the Mount, near the beginning of his ministry, he said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and

> falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12). Again, in the Upper Room near the close of his ministry, he said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also..." (John 15:18-20).

There are two points here. First, Jesus suffered. Suffering was his lot, and it has always been the lot of God's godly people. It must be that way since they were (and are) living in a sinful world. Second, suffering proves that we are on the side of Jesus and these godly people, for if we were not, the world would approve of us rather than being hostile.

Jonathan Chao, president of Christ's College, Taipei, and director of the Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong, has studied suffering in the context of the suffering of the church in China. He says, "One can almost say that suffering for Christ is a mark of discipleship." D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who explores this line of thought extensively in his study of Romans 8:17, says, "If you are suffering as a Christian, and because you are a Christian, it is one of the surest proofs you can ever have of the fact that you are a child of God." That is an important use of persecution. It proves that we are Christians and therefore disciples for Christ.

2. *Purification.* Not all suffering is in the form of persecution, however. Some of it is from God and is for no other reason than to produce growth and holiness. This is what the author of Hebrews was talking about when he wrote in reference to Jesus, "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering" (Heb. 2:10).

That is a bold thing to say, of course, for it suggests that in some way Jesus was not perfect, which causes us to think immediately, though incorrectly, of some moral imperfection. We would be wrong to think that, since Jesus was utterly without sin. He was morally impeccable. Nevertheless, as Luke says, his life in the flesh included growth "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Perfection means wholeness, and Jesus grew into a wholeness of experience and trust in God through such things as poverty, temptation, misunderstanding, loneliness, abuse, and betrayal. God used these and many other experiences to "perfect" him. He also uses them to perfect us.

We are sinners, of course. So one image the Bible uses in speaking of this similar work in us is the refining of precious metal (Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:3). It pictures God as a skilled refiner, heating the ore until the dross that has been mixed with it rises to the surface, where it may be scraped off. The refiner knows the metal is ready when he can see his face reflected in the glimmering molten surface. In the same way, God purifies us until he can see the face of Jesus Christ in his people.

One of our hymns puts it nicely:

> When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
> My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;
> The flame shall not hurt thee, I
> only design Thy dross to
> consume and thy gold to
> refine.

Another image of the Christian's suffering is of God disciplining us as an earthly father disciplines his children. The author of Hebrews writes of this, too, saying, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.... Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of

righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:7-8, 10-11).

3. *Training.* A third kind of suffering also has value for Christians and can be likened to the suffering endured when a soldier is trained for combat by his commanding officer or, for that matter, the suffering endured in the battle itself. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Endure hardness with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:3). Elsewhere he changes the image and speaks of the rigorous preparation of an athlete: "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:27).

If you are called to endure any of these three kinds of suffering, you should be encouraged by them because they prove that you are a child of God and are being prepared to be used by him in the spiritual warfare that will lead to final victory.

The Power of the Christian's Witness

A second value of suffering is that *our witness to Christ is empowered by it.* I do not mean that we grow stronger in our ability to witness to Christ to the extent that we are called to endure persecution or some other form of suffering, though that is undoubtedly true. The blind man of John 9 grew stronger in his witness every time the religious authorities leaned on him to get him to modify his testimony. I mean, rather, that the witness of Christians carries particular weight when it is given under duress, when it is evident to everyone that it would be easier and apparently more rational to back off from one's witness or even, as Job was advised by his wife, to "curse God and die!" (Job 2:9).

Physical suffering gives particular clout to the witness of Christians. It means something special when a person can testify to God's grace when he or she is suffering from acute bodily pain or while dying. It is even more convincing when Christians bear witness to Jesus when they might suffer the loss of all things for it.

I previously mentioned Jonathan Chao and his insights into Christian suffering. He has studied the suffering church in China and reports many instances of this empowerment. One young Chinese pastor was imprisoned in 1960 and released in 1979. When he was released he discovered that during that nineteen-year period his parish had grown from 300 to 5,000 professing Christians. Today that same community has grown to 20,000.

In 1982 a Christian community in central China dispatched a missionary team in response to a Macedonian-type cry for help from another area. In a month of intense work they had established several new churches. But then most of the senior pastors were arrested. They were imprisoned for four years. However, their arrest forced the younger pastors to take over the leadership positions, and as a result not only were the home churches cared for, but the mission expanded and the growth in that area was phenomenal. People were persuaded to believe on Christ by the quality and duration of their leaders' suffering.

A fourteen-year-old girl understood this. She was one of nine young evangelists who were arrested by the local police and forced to remain kneeling in one place day and night. On the third day of this torture she fainted and was released. The others were made to suffer the same continuing torment for nine days and eight nights. Eventually they, too, were released, and when they were reunited the fourteen-year-old began to cry. "Why are you crying?" they asked.

She replied that she was crying because they had been called on to suffer for nine days while she had only been called on to suffer for three. Fourteen years old! But she understood the point of suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ and counted it not a burden but a privilege.

Is it any wonder that the church in China is growing at a tremendous rate today while the church in America is barely holding its own in numbers and is declining markedly in devotion and character? Most of us want only the good life, not godliness. And our fourteen-year-olds think they are suffering if they have to turn off their personal TV and do their homework.

The Path to Glory

The final thing we need to say about the value of suffering is that *it is the ordained path to glory.* Paul says this explicitly in Romans 8:17: "... we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." He also says this elsewhere. In 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 he writes joyfully, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

There are two basic things to remember about suffering.

First, suffering is necessary. Jesus taught that it was necessary for *himself* when he said to the
Emmaus disciples, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Then he proved that this was necessary by showing it to them in the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. Jesus taught that suffering is necessary for *us* when he said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20b) and "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33a, KJV).

Second, although suffering is necessary (and has value), suffering is not the end of the story for Christians. Glory is! If suffering were the end, Christianity would be a form of masochism, suffering for suffering's sake. Since it is not the end, since suffering is the path to glory, Christianity is a religion of genuine hope and effective consolation.

The Christian who needs to worry about suffering is not the one who is suffering, particularly if it is for the sake of Jesus Christ. The person who should worry is the one who is *not* suffering, since suffering is a proof of our sonship, a means for the spread of the gospel, and the path to glory.

So let's hang in there! And let's encourage one another as we run the race and fight the long battles.

We need each other, but we have each other. That is what we are given to each other for. Thus, by the grace of God, we may actually come to the end of the warfare and be able to say as Paul did to his young protege Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8). May it be so for all God's people.

Chapter 104.
The Incomparable Glory

Romans 8:18

There are times in every preacher's work when, if he takes the task of teaching the Bible seriously, he comes to themes that he knows are beyond him. In one sense everything in the Bible is beyond us. The Bible contains God's thoughts, and none of us is ever fully able to encompass the mind of the Infinite. Nevertheless, there are teachings that we do basically understand—because God has revealed them to us. Not so with every idea in the Bible. From time to time, we come to thoughts that we know we shall never fully understand, at least not until we get to heaven.

Glory is one of them. I call it "incomparable," not only because it resists comparison with anything we know in this life, particularly suffering, which is the contrast found in our text, but because glory is truly beyond our comprehension. At best we have only an intimation of it.

Glory is the word best used to describe God's magnificence and therefore also the dazzling magnificence of heaven and our share in it. But when we look for descriptions of heaven in the Bible, in most cases the descriptions have a negative cast only. They tell us what heaven will *not* contain. The best description of heaven in the Bible is probably that of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. But think how the New Jerusalem is portrayed by the "loud voice from the throne"—"Now the

dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 20:3-4). That God will dwell with us is positive. But the strength of the description is in the words: no tears, no pain, no death, no mourning! These are all negative ideas, no doubt because we cannot fully comprehend the positive things but can understand the removal of that which troubles our lives now.

And yet, the greatest word for what is in store for God's people is glory. Our text says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

What Is Glory?

What is this "glory"? I find definitions of glory in the various commentaries, since incomprehensibility has never kept true scholars from defining anything. But the definitions seem inadequate to me. I want to suggest that in the case of the word *glory* we will make far better progress with the thinking of someone whose forte is literature, particularly poetry, rather than biblical scholarship. For that reason, I suggest an essay on glory by C. S. Lewis.

In the summer of 1941, Lewis was asked to give an evening sermon at the Oxford University
Church of Saint Mary, and he responded by preparing the piece to which I refer. It was called "The Weight of Glory." Lewis, one of the greatest Christian apologists of the twentieth century, began by referring to a longing all human beings have for something that can hardly be expressed. He called it "a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy," and he found it in our wish to be approved by God. He argued that the biblical word for expressing this wish is glory.

At first, the idea of seeking divine approval seems to be unworthy, as it also did to Lewis when he began his study. But he said that he came to see that it is not unworthy at all but, on the contrary, expresses a natural

and desirable order of things. A child wants approval from his parents and is right to want it. Creatures should want approval from their Creator. We are God's creatures, and we do. But the problem is that we behave in a way that destroys the possibility of that approval, unless God intervenes to save and transform us, which he does in Jesus Christ. One day we will appear before God for judgment. What will happen to us on that day? Lewis asked his listeners. He answered, "We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside*—repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. On the other hand, we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged. We walk every day on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities."

But there is more to glory even than this. Glory denotes not only "worth," "acceptance," or
"approval." It also denotes "brightness," "splendor," and "luminosity," perhaps even "beauty." And we long for all that, too! In fact, we long not only to see what is beautiful. We want to participate in it, to be on the inside of this divine, heavenly beauty, rather than on the outside. In my judgment, it is here that Lewis, the poet, is at his best:

We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already; you can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings, if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it....

That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can't. They tell us that "beauty born of murmuring sound" will pass into a human face; but it won't. Or not yet. For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star

and cause us to *put on* the splendor of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in.* When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch.

Do we understand the meaning of glory now? No, I do not think we do, at least not fully. But we have a framework with which we can address the biblical teaching and uncover the specific contribution of our text.

Ichabod

The first thing the Bible adds to our understanding is that we long for glory because we once enjoyed it. I do not mean that individually we did. We did not exist prior to our births. I mean that we enjoyed glory once as a race—in Adam. Adam was made "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:26-27), which means, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "that man at the beginning had a kind of glory." He was like God, and he may even have been clothed with the splendor of God like a garment, as one commentator has suggested.

But man today is a disgrace compared to what he once was. He is a fallen being and well described by the biblical name "Ichabod," meaning "no glory" because "the glory [had] departed from Israel" (1 Sam. 4:21). As far as man is concerned, the glory has departed from his body, his soul, and his spirit.

Man was once a beautiful physical specimen. The man Adam and the woman Eve were the glory of creation. They excelled the rest of the created order in every respect. But when they sinned, physical decay,

sickness, suffering, and eventually physical death came upon them. God said, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen. 3:19b). They were not originally destined to die, but die they did. Man was also beautiful in soul, the most beautiful of all the creatures. He had a nobility that transcends our ability to fathom. But once Adam and Eve sinned, that beautiful soul was tarnished. Now they began to lie and cheat and shift the blame from their own failings to those of others. Most significant was the ruination of their spirits. The spirit was that part of Adam and Eve that had communion with God. They had walked and talked with God in the garden. But once they fell, they no longer sought God out. They hid from him, and the encounter that eventually came was a judgment.

We enjoyed glory once, which is why we long for it so much. But it is gone, gone with the wind. What a marvelous thing it is then, when we turn to the Bible, to find that the end of our salvation in Christ is not merely deliverance from sin and evil and their consequences, but glorification. God is restoring to us all that our first parents lost.

More Than Adam Lost

This is what Paul is beginning to deal with here in Romans, which brings us to our text. But as soon as we turn to that text and try to place it in its context, we notice that something greater even than the restoration of Adam and Eve's lost glory is involved. As we read on in Romans 8 we find that we are to have an enjoyment of God and a participation in God that surpasses Adam's.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says,

Adam was perfect man, but his perfection fell short of glorification. There was room for development, and it is clear that glorification was the ultimate that was intended for man. As man he was perfect; there was no blemish in him, there was no sin in him; there was no fault in him. He was in a state of innocence, but innocence falls short of glorification. But what is held before us and offered to us in Christ, and promised us in him, is nothing less than glorification. The thing to

which man, if he had continued to keep God's commandments, would have arrived, and which would have been given to him as a reward for his obedience, is the thing that is now freely given us in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Weighed in the Balance

All this brings me directly to the text. For in Romans 8:18 Paul is comparing the future glory to be enjoyed by God's people to their present sufferings, but saying that the glory far outstrips their suffering. That is obvious, isn't it? For if the glory we are to enjoy is to exceed even that minimal glory enjoyed by Adam, it is certain that it will exceed the trials we are enduring now.

Paul introduces an interesting though somewhat hidden image at this point in the verbal adjective translated "not worth comparing." It is the Greek word *axiōs*, from the verb *agō*, which means "to drive," "lead," or "cause to move." Figuratively used, it refers to something that is heavy enough to promote motion in a balance or, as we would say, to tip the scales. When we remember that the word *glory* itself denotes something that is weighty or has substance, it is clear what Paul is suggesting. He is saying that the future glory laid up for us is so weighty that our present sufferings are as feathers compared to it and that they cannot even begin to move the scales.

Paul provides a parallel to our text in 2 Corinthians 4:16-17, following a poignant mention of the many persecutions and sufferings he had endured for the sake of Christ. He says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far *outweighs* them all" (emphasis added).

These two passages suggest several areas of comparison between our present sufferings and the glory that is to come.

1. *Their intensity.* The first area of comparison is between the intensity of the suffering and the intensity of the glory or, as we have been saying, between the "weight" of the two. Suffering is heavy. It hurts. It can hurt so intensely that we scream with terror or cry out with pain. But, says Paul, the intensity of our sufferings is not worth comparing with the glory. And he should know.

Paul suffered as much as any man has suffered, judging from his descriptions in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 6:4-10; and 11:16-33. But he also had a vision of heaven's glory, having been "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2). In his opinion the intensity of the former is not to be compared to the grandeur of the latter.

2. *Their location.* The second area of comparison is between the location of our sufferings and the location of our glory. That is an awkward way of putting it, of course, but it is hard to think of something better. In Romans 8:18 Paul says that the glory of God is to be revealed "in us," using a word that literally means "internally" or "in our very being." This should be contrasted with the words "though outwardly we are wasting away," which he uses in the parallel text in 2 Corinthians.

The idea seems to be this: Suffering, though felt deeply, nevertheless only affects our outward persons, our bodies. It does not affect the real "us," those redeemed beings that, says Paul, are "being renewed day by day." It is that "real me," the inner me, that is going to participate in the glory. In other words, it is as C. S. Lewis said. We are not just going to observe the beauty; we are going to share in it: "God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to *put on* the splendor of the sun.... Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*." The endurance of outward suffering is not to be compared to our participation in this glory.

3. *Their duration.* The final point of contrast between suffering and glory concerns their duration. In Romans Paul distinguishes between "present sufferings," which means those belonging to this present age, and the glory "that will be revealed," meaning the unchanging and eternal glory of the age to come. In 2 Corinthians

he calls the sufferings "momentary" and glory "eternal." You and I do not think much about eternity. But if we can make ourselves think this way, it is evident that there is no comparison between the glory of the eternal state and the sufferings of this passing earthly time, however painful our sufferings may be while we are going through them.

Breaking the Spell

I want to say finally that if we can appreciate what Paul is saying in this text and get it fixed in our minds, we will find it able to change the way we look at life and the way we live—more than anything else we can imagine. It will provide two things at least.

1. *Vision.* Focusing on the promise of glory will give us a vision of life in its eternal context, which means that we will begin to see life here as it really is. We have two problems at this point. First, we are limited by our concept of time. We think in terms of the "threescore years and ten" allotted to us, or at best the few years that have led up to our earthly existence or the few years after it. We do not have a long view. Second, we are limited by our materialism. Our reference point is what we perceive through our senses, so we have the greatest possible difficulty thinking of "the spirit" and other intangibles. We need to be delivered from this bondage and awakened from our spiritual blindness.

In "The Weight of Glory" Lewis addressed the objection of those who might consider his talk about glory as only fantasy, the weaving of a spell. He replied by admitting that perhaps that is what he was trying to do. But he reminded his listeners that spells in fairy tales are of two kinds. Some induce enchantments. Others break them. "You and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years." That is not the way I would say it. I would speak of truth as opposed to this world's falsehood. But it is probably the same

thing. Both mean that we need to emerge from our darkness into God's light.

2. *Endurance.* "Breaking the spell" will give us strength to endure whatever hardships, temptations, persecutions, or physical suffering it pleases God to send us. Suppose there were no glory. Suppose this life really were all there is. If that were the case, I for one would not endure anything, at least nothing I could avoid. And I would probably break down under the tribulations I could not avoid. But knowing that there is an eternal weight of glory waiting, I will try to do what pleases God and hang on in spite of anything. Here is the way hymnwriter Henry F. Lyte expressed it:

Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou from hence my all shalt be.
Perish every fond ambition,
All I've sought or hoped or known;
Yet how rich is my condition,
God and heaven are still my own.
Man may trouble and distress me,
'Twill but drive me to thy breast;
Life with trials hard may press me,
Heaven will bring me sweeter rest.
O 'tis not in grief to harm me
While my love is left to me;
O 'twere not in joy to charm me,
Were that joy unmixed with thee.

Haste then on from grace to glory,
Armed by faith and winged by prayer;
Heaven's eternal day's before thee,
God's own hand shall guide thee there.
Soon shall close thine earthly mission;

Swift shall pass thy pilgrim days;
Hope soon change to glad fruition,
Faith to sight, and prayer to praise.

There is one more word in Romans 8:18 that we need to examine. It is the word *consider* (or "reckon" in KJV). We have seen it fifteen times in this epistle, noting that it has to do with reason. It is the process by which we figure something out. I stress it because, although I referred to the idea of "breaking a spell," I do not want you to suppose that there is anything magical about this. Magic *is* for fairy tales. But we are dealing with God's real world, and we are instructed to think this out clearly.

Paul writes, "I consider that..." meaning that he has thought it through and concluded that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (KJV). By using this word he invites us to think it through also.

If you are a Christian, I ask, "Isn't what the apostle says in this verse true? Isn't the glory to come worth anything you might be asked to face here, however painful or distressing?" D. Martin Lloyd-Jones challenged his congregation with these words: "The great reality is the glory that is coming.... Hold on to this idea, that we do not really belong to this present age, that 'our citizenship is in heaven.' This present world is passing, transient, temporary. 'The world to come' is the real, the permanent world. That is the one that has substance and which will endure forever."

If you know that you are part of heaven's citizenry, you will endure—and say with the hymnwriter, "yet how rich is my condition."

Chapter 105.
The Redemption of Creation

Romans 8:19-21

At the end of our previous study I wrote about the importance of the word *consider* in verse 18.

It refers to a rational process by which a thinking person is able to figure something out. What Paul is thinking about is, as we would say, whether the Christian life is worth it. The Christian life is not easy. It involves rigorous self-denial, persecutions, even some sufferings. Unbelievers, worldly people, seem to have it better. Why should we, too, not live only for pleasure? What is to be gained by godliness?

As Paul considers this, it becomes perfectly evident to him why the Christian way is the only rational way—for two reasons we have already studied and for another that we are to investigate now. The first reason is the contrast between the short duration of our present sufferings and the timelessness of eternity. In verse 18 Paul uses the word *present* to refer to the shortness of this temporal age and does not actually mention eternity. But in the parallel text in 2 Corinthians 4:17 he contrasts our "momentary troubles" with "eternal glory," making the point explicit.

The second reason why the Christian life is "rational" lies in the contrast between the weight of our sufferings, which is light, and the weight of the glory yet to come. Paul does not deny that the earthly sufferings we experience are grievous. In 1 and 2 Corinthians he lists some of the tribulations he endured, and they were indeed heavy. But, he says, weighty as they are, "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Think it out, he says. Put both on a scale. If you do, you will find that our present sufferings are really inconsequential if compared with the glory to come: "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Hopeful Cosmos

The two arguments from verse 18 are alone adequate to prove Paul's point: that the Christian life is eminently worth it. But because Paul's was an extraordinary mind, he continues the argument into verse 19 and beyond. We miss this a bit in the New International Version since, in an effort to provide smooth English sentences, the translators have

eliminated the conjunction "for," which actually begins the verse. You will see that word at the start of verse 20, but "for" actually begins verse 19 and verse 18 as well.

The verses literally say, "*For* I consider.... *For* the creation waits.... *For* the creation was subjected...." In other words, verses 18-21 are all part of a long and carefully sustained argument.

The new element at this point is "the creation" or, as we would probably say today, "the cosmos." It is important to get this reference straight, for the word *creation* can obviously refer to every and all things God has made: man, the angels, demons, the physical universe, animals, whatever. But is that its meaning here? A little thought will show that in these verses creation must have a restricted meaning.

John Murray does the best job of anyone in analyzing this, for he shows in his commentary that verses 20-23 clearly delimit the term. "*Angels* are not included because they were not subjected to vanity and to the bondage of corruption. *Satan* and the *demons* are not included because they cannot be regarded as longing for the manifestation of the sons of God and they will not share in the liberty of the glory of the children of God. The *children of God* themselves are not included because they are distinguished from 'the creation' (vv. 19, 21, 23).... The *unbelieving* of mankind cannot be included because the earnest expectation does not characterize them." In other words, "all of *rational* creation is excluded by the terms of verses 20-23." The only thing that is left is the "non-rational creation, animate and inanimate."

And that is just it! Paul is talking about the physical world of matter, plants, and animals. His argument is that nature is in a presently imperfect state, but that it is longing for the day of liberation. Paul is personifying nature, of course, but he does not mean that inanimate nature has personal feelings that correspond to ours. He means only that nature is not yet all that God has predestined it to be. It is waiting for its true fulfillment. But if nature is waiting, we should be willing to wait in hope, too, knowing that a glorious outcome is certain. This is the third reason why Christianity is worth it.

The Blind (Unbelieving) Observer

This view of creation is radically different from the world's, of course, and this is worth pursuing. In general the world makes either one of two errors. Either it deifies the cosmos, virtually worshiping it as an ideal. Or else it regards the cosmos as gradually evolving toward perfection, accompanied by the human race, which is also so evolving.

I am sure many of us have in mind that powerful television image of Carl Sagan on the science series "Cosmos," standing before a large screen on which there is a display of a segment of the night sky in its brilliant starry splendor and saying in nearly mystical tones, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." That is what I mean by deifying the cosmos. In this series Sagan is a portrait of unbelieving man, standing on the very tips of his toes, peering off into the distant and mysterious heavens as far as his telescopes will allow, and declaring with blind arrogance, "The world is all that is."

But Paul gives us a different picture, although he, too, pictures something staring off into the distance. That is the meaning of the words "waits in eager expectation." J. B. Phillips captures this idea literally when he translates "is on tiptoe to see...." But, according to Paul, it is not man who is on tiptoe looking. It is creation itself. In other words, if Carl Sagan could see as the Christian sees, he would say that the entire cosmos is actually looking beyond itself to God. And what creation is earnestly awaiting, as it looks beyond itself, is the "glorious freedom of the children of God" that it will share.

There are few images to equal this in all Scripture.

The world makes another error that is not entirely different from the first but is related to that idea. It sees in nature some kind of ongoing and automatic perfecting principle. This is almost like saying that the world is not God yet, but it is on the way. In cosmic terms this is the principle of evolution. In human terms it is the principle of inevitable perfection: "Every day in every way I am getting better and better." In other words, "I may not be God yet, but I will be, given time." Of

course, a lot of time has gone by—millions of years according to L. S. B. Leakey and other evolution-ists—yet man seems to be as much unlike God as he ever was. And man's world is woefully far from perfect.

A Christian World-View

The Christian's perspective, supplied by Scripture, is at this point far more balanced and mature than anything the blind and unbelieving world can devise. The Christian doctrine of the cosmos has three parts.

1. *This is God's world.* Everything in our passage presupposes this, not least the fact that the cosmos is called "creation." That term presupposes a Creator, which is exactly what the Christian maintains is the case. This world is not eternally existent. Scientific evidence for the Big Bang alone tells us that. Nor did the world come into existence by itself. Reason tells us that. For, in order for the creation to come into being "by itself," it would have to create itself, and that would mean it was in existence before it was created. In other words, it would have had to be and *not* be at the same time and in the same relationship, which is absurd. The only rational view of origins is that God made everything.

The consequence of this for Christians is that the cosmos—the creation—has value, not because humans ascribe value to it but because God created it and it is therefore valuable to him. Here we have a fundamental divergence between the Christian and the non-Christian outlooks.

Because Christians view the creation as God's handiwork, they respect and value the cosmos but do not worship it as an end in itself. Those who do not understand that God is Creator of the cosmos either worship the universe, which I have suggested Carl Sagan comes very close to doing, or else they abuse it, stripping it of anything that is of value to themselves. People cut down entire forests, allowing the earth to erode uselessly away. Or they poison their water, killing the fish and endangering their own health. Or they pollute the air, perhaps even

damaging the protective ozone layer around the earth and thereby subjecting themselves and their descendants to the sun's destructive rays.

2. *This world is not what it was created to be.* The problems with the cosmos are not only those that the human race has inflicted on it, mostly destruction and pollution. The world has also been subjected to troubles as the result of God's judgment on man, rendered at the time of the fall. God told Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you," and "It will produce thorns and thistles for you" (Gen. 3:17-18). Nature had not sinned; Adam had. But nature was subjected to a downgrading because of him and thus entered into his judgment. It is this trouble, the result of God's judgment on sin, that Paul is particularly concerned with in Romans. He uses three words to describe it.

First, *frustration.* This is the feeling we humans have when we know we should attain to some goal and are trying to reach it but are repeatedly thrown back or defeated. I want to go carefully at this point, since Paul does not explain exactly what he is thinking of. But let me suggest that (whether or not this is exactly what he has in mind) we have a picture of the creation's
"frustration" in the way nature asserts itself in the annual renewal of springtime but is constantly defeated as spring passes into autumn and autumn into winter. It is as if nature wants always to be glorious but is impeded in its attempts to be so.

If that is a valid example, it leads me to think further to the way C. S. Lewis developed the idea in the first of his Narnia Chronicles, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* You may recall that in the first section of that book, when Narnia was under the power of the wicked Witch of the North, the land was in a state of perpetual winter. Spring never came. But when Asian died and rose again, a picture of Christ's resurrection, the ice began to melt, flowers began to bloom, the trees turned green, and an eternal spring was brought into existence. Using that image, we could say that the cosmos as we know it is in a state of winter now but

is looking forward to that eternal spring of which the diurnal springs we know here are only hints of what is promised.

Our winters, the "winters of our discontent," link us to inanimate nature in its and our own frustrations.

Second, *bondage.* The bondage of nature is linked to its frustration and is the cause of it. But bondage speaks of the actual state of things, while frustration has to do with the resulting feelings. Bondage literally means slavery, wherein one entity is unwillingly subjected to the authority of another. This is what Paul means here. He is saying that although nature does not want to be as it is, it is powerless to do anything about it. The creation needs to be delivered by God.

This is what redemption is all about, of course, which is why I have called this chapter "The Redemption of Creation." The creation longs for redemption, and it will have it when the children of God are likewise fully redeemed.

Third, *decay.* Nothing Paul says about creation is as obvious to today's scientific observers as this: the cosmos is decaying or running down. This is called the second law of thermodynamics. It is another scientific axiom that neither mass nor energy are destroyed but are only converted from one to the other. Einstein's formula of relativity, $E=Mc^2$, is an expression of this. But although, by this formula, energy is not being destroyed, it is nevertheless becoming increasingly dissipated, which means that it is becoming increasingly less useful. For example, the sun's energy is not being lost even though its mass is being converted into energy. But that energy is being dissipated into space, where it is not accomplishing anything, and one day the sun will use up its energy and be gone. The whole universe is like that. It is all running down, dissipating, becoming increasingly useless.

However, Paul was probably thinking specifically of death, which comes to all living things, rather than the scientific principles I mentioned, since he would hardly have known of these "laws" except

by general observation. It is not only the sun that is dying, of course. Living creatures die, too.

3. *The world will one day be renewed.* The third point in a Christian doctrine of creation is that, in spite of creation's current frustration, bondage, and decay, the day is coming when the world will be renewed. Spring will come, and the winter of creation's present discontent will be past history.

I am not sure how to understand this, though I know the options. Some people think of the redemption of creation in terms of the millennium, when Christ will rule on earth and a glorious "golden age" will be ushered in. Some think of this as a future eternal state, intangible and quite cut off from this present age of imperfection and suffering. Perhaps the closest we can come (and still be fairly sure we are on the right track) is by an analogy to the "redemption of our bodies," which is brought into the picture in verse 24. The redemption of our bodies means the resurrection of our bodies. So perhaps this is what creation will experience, a resurrection. In our resurrections we will have a continuity of our bodies (our earthly bodies will be raised), but our bodies will be different, heavenly, glorified. Creation will probably experience something like that, too.

Isn't this what the text must mean when it says, "Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21)?

Paradise Regained

A few paragraphs back I traced the origin of the world's troubles to Genesis 3, where we are told that creation was subjected to the "frustration" described by Paul because of the sin of our first parents. I return to that chapter now, since in Genesis 3 we also find the promise of God's solution to the problem, which puts the redemption of creation in proper context.

What happened in the Garden of Eden is that Satan, the great enemy of God, tried to impede God's plans to create a world of men and women

who would know and love him. Satan thought that if he could get the man and woman to rebel against God, he would defeat God's purpose. When he accomplished their fall, he thought he had done so. Indeed, he seemed to have done even better. For not only did he draw our first parents away from God, he brought the judgment of God upon creation itself. That beautiful world was tarnished, spoiled. It began to decay, and the creatures who had caused its fall and God's judgment soon added their own destructive efforts to its ruin.

Ah, but God intervened. It is true that God came in judgment on Satan and on the woman and the man and the world they had known. But even as he pronounced a judgment upon Satan, God also gave a promise of a future deliverer, saying, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). This was a promise that Jesus would come one day to save all who would believe on him, but it was also more than that. It was a promise that in Christ God would frustrate Satan, undo his destructive works, and once again bring a redeemed human race into a redeemed creation. The promise was that Paradise will be perfected and regained.

As I said, I do not know what all this is going to mean, anymore than I know exactly what our resurrection bodies will be like. But I know how the prophet Isaiah speaks of it. In that day, he says:

> The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
> the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.
> The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
> The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
> They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
> For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11:6-9

Poetical? Of course, but what a powerful picture of the redeemed world that will be! The creation is waiting for that day, says Paul. And if it is, can we not wait in hopeful expectation, too? And be faithful children of God?

Looking to Jesus

What I am commending to you is a Christian perspective on this life and all we know in it, what the theologians call a world-and-life view. And I am suggesting, as Paul does, that adopting it will rearrange your values and change your approach to suffering and the disappointments of life. If you learn to reason as Paul does, you will experience the following:

1. *You will not be surprised when things go wrong in this life.* This world is not a good place. We live in a fallen environment. Your plans will misfire, you will often fail, others will destroy what you have spent long years and much toil to accomplish. This will be true even if you are a Christian and are trying to follow Jesus. But your successes are not what life is all about. What matters is your love for God and your faithfulness.

2. *You will not place your ultimate hope in anything human beings can do to improve this world's conditions.* This does not mean that you will fail to do what good you can do in this life as well as encourage others in their efforts to do good. As a Christian, you will. But you will not delude yourself into thinking that the salvation of the world's ills will be brought about by mere human efforts. You will feed the poor, but you will know that Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you" (Matt. 26:11a). You will pray for your leaders, but you will know that they are but sinful men and women like yourself and that they will always disappoint you.

3. *You will keep your eyes on Jesus.* Where else can you look? All others are disappointing, and everything is crumbling about you. Only he is worthy of your trust. He has promised to return in his glory, and we know that when he does return and we see him in his glory, we will be like him

(1 John 3:2). Moreover, when we are made like him in his glory, the creation that is also straining forward to that day will become glorious, too.

No wonder the early Christians prayed, *"Maranatha!"* Come, Lord Jesus!

Chapter 106.
The Redemption of Our Bodies

Romans 8:22-25

In the passage of Romans 8 that begins with verse 22, and (in the following paragraph) ends with verse 27, we find a word that is repeated three times and yet is found nowhere else in this letter. In fact, it is found only six more times in the entire New Testament. It is the Greek word *stenazō*
(variants, *sustenazō* and *stenagmos*), and it is translated "groan" (v. 23), "groans" (v. 26), and "groaning" (v. 22). The interesting thing is that it is applied to three different entities in these verses: to creation, to ourselves, and to the Holy Spirit.

Of creation Paul says, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (v. 22).

Of ourselves he says, "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (v. 23).

Of the Holy Spirit he says, "... We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (v. 26).

Two of these references are hard to understand. Since Paul is thinking of the inanimate creation and not men, angels, or demons in verse 22, it is hard to imagine how mere matter or even plants or animals can be conceived of as groaning. It is also difficult to envision the Holy Spirit's groans, though for different reasons. The one part of these verses that is not difficult to understand is *our* groaning, since groaning is a part of daily life with which almost anyone can easily identify.

Still, we need to see two things about this human groaning if we are to understand the verses to which we now come.

First, the groaning mentioned in verse 23 is that of believers in Jesus Christ and not that of all people generally. Paul makes this explicit when he writes that "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly." I do not think this excludes the kind of groanings that Christians share with other people, expressions of grief caused by physical suffering or the loss of a loved one, for instance. But it means more. Christians grieve over the presence of sin in their lives, which unbelievers do not. In fact, believers grieve for sin increasingly as they grow in Christ. Christians also groan as the result of persecutions suffered for the sake of their life and witness, and this is also different from what non-Christians experience.

Second, the groaning of Christians is not mere grief over the things I mentioned. It is *expectant* grief, that is, grief that looks forward to a time when all that is causing pain will be removed and salvation will be consummated. Christian groaning is a joyful grief that gives birth to a sure hope and patient endurance.

The passage itself shows this, since hope and patience are the notes on which the verses end. But there is also a powerful image at the start of this paragraph that shows how the groans of Christians are to be interpreted. Paul uses the image of childbirth: "... the whole creation has

been groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (v. 22), adding that "we ourselves... [also] groan" (v. 23). This is an important analogy, because it points beyond the cause of grief to its joyful consummation. The pains of childbirth are real pains, severe ones. But they are not endless; they last only for a time. Nor are they hopeless. On the contrary, they are filled with joyful expectation, since under normal circumstances they climax in the birth of a child.

Paul is saying that our griefs as Christians are like that. We groan, but we do so in expectation of a safe delivery.

Groans and Glory

This is a thoughtful continuation of the arguments Paul has been working out since the beginning of Romans 8. The theme of the chapter is the Christian's assurance that he or she has been saved by Christ and will be kept in this salvation by the love and power of God the Father.

The first part of the chapter distinguished between those who are truly saved and those who are not. Paul was aware of the dangers of presumption, of claiming an assurance that one has no right to unless one's conduct shows that the Spirit of Jesus Christ really is within. But having made that point—that those who are Christ's *will* live for Christ—Paul then got into his major argument, showing that true Christians can know they are saved and be confident in that assurance. We have seen that there are four proofs: (1) the fact that those who are Christians really do live for Christ; (2) the internal sense Christians have of being members of God's family; (3) the Holy Spirit's direct witness with our spirits; and (4) suffering. Paul said, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (v. 17).

But that is a problem, as we saw when we studied that verse. Sufferings? We would think that it would be the absence of sufferings, not their presence, that would prove we belong to Christ. If God loves us, shouldn't he keep us from suffering? Or isn't he able to? When

things get hard it is natural that we begin to doubt God's favor rather than being assured of it.

That, of course, is why Paul has digressed to talk about suffering and why he is talking about our groanings now. It is why he has explained the involvement of creation in our present distress. What he is saying is that the sufferings we and "the whole creation" endure are the sufferings of childbirth and are therefore proof that the new age is coming. And it is why, although we do groan, we do not groan hopelessly. On the contrary, our groanings intensify our hope and enable us to wait patiently for the consummation.

The Resurrection of the Body

These verses also do something else that is important. They give substance to the Christian hope.
That is, they begin to flesh out the main features of the consummation for which we are waiting.
In verse 23 this is done by means of three word pictures or images: (1) "the firstfruits of the Spirit," (2) "our adoption as sons," and (3) "the redemption of our bodies." It is easiest to take them in reverse order.

What does Paul mean by the redemption of our bodies? This is an easy question to answer: he means the resurrection, the chief element in the hope of Christians.

This is an important idea to bring in at this point for at least two reasons. First, Paul has been talking about our sufferings, and it is chiefly in our bodies that we experience them. Physical suffering, whether from illness or abuse inflicted by persecutors, is experienced in the body. And there is even a sense in which psychological wounds are physical, though we do not usually think of them that way. We experience them in our minds, which are hard to distinguish from mere brain matter and neurological connections, but the effects are often directly physiological since they are seen in such things as sleeplessness, ulcers, hypertension, and other maladies.

Second, we are our bodies, as well as our spirits and souls. Therefore, salvation must include our bodies if it is to be complete.

Suppose someone should ask you, "Are you saved?" How would you answer? As a Christian it would be proper to answer in three ways. You could say, "Yes, I have been saved." In that case, you would be pointing back to the death of Jesus Christ on your behalf and to that past work of the Holy Spirit in turning you from a path of sin and joining you to Jesus. You could also say, "I am being saved." If you said that, you would be pointing to the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in your life, much as Paul did in the earlier part of this chapter. You would be thinking of the Spirit's work of sanctification. Finally, you could also say, "I am going to be saved." In that case, you would be thinking of the resurrection, when the work of God—begun by the death of Christ and continued by the work of the Holy Spirit in joining you to Jesus and sanctifying you—will be completed. Paul is thinking of that consummation here.

But there is one more question directly related to our text. Paul is writing about the Christian's resurrection, but that is not the word he uses to refer to it. He calls it "the *redemption* of our bodies." Redemption usually refers to the work of Christ in delivering us from sin's bondage by his death. Why does Paul use "redemption" instead of "resurrection" here?

Robert Haldane, one of the best of all commentators on Romans, suggests an interesting answer:

When this term is... used, it commonly denotes two things—the one, that the deliverance spoken of is effected in a manner glorious and conspicuous, exhibiting the greatest effort of power; the other, that it is a complete deliverance, placing us beyond all danger. On this ground, then, it is evident that no work is better entitled to the appellation of redemption than that of the reestablishment of our bodies, which will be an illustrious effect of the infinite power of God. It is the work of the Lord of nature—of him who holds in his hands the keys of life and death. His light alone can dispel the darkness of the tomb. It is only his

hand that can break its seal and its silence. On this account the apostle appeals, with an accumulation of terms, to the exceeding greatness of the power of God to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead (Eph. 1:19, 20).

It is no wonder that we groan in these bodies. They are the seat of physical weakness, on the one hand, and of our sinful natures, on the other. But we groan in hope, knowing that these weak and sinful bodies are going to be transformed into bodies that are strong, sinless, and glorious, like the resurrection body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Adoption as Sons

The second image that Paul offers of our sure hope of future glory is "adoption," speaking of "our adoption as sons." This is the same word that we have already seen in verse 15, where it was translated "sonship."

But that creates a problem. In verse 15 our adoption was treated as something that has already taken place. That is the way we considered it when we were at that point in the chapter. I spoke of our having been taken out of the family of Satan and having been brought into the family of God. It corresponds to the way a young couple today might adopt a child who has no parents or has parents who are unable to care for him or her. But in verse 23 adoption is treated as something still in the future, something for which "we wait eagerly." How can adoption be both past and future at the same time?

The answer, of course, is that the word is used in two senses. In one sense we have already received our adoption, since we have been brought into God's family. Nothing is ever going to change that family relationship. Yet in a second sense we still wait for our adoption, because we do not yet enjoy all its privileges.

I am convinced that when Paul speaks of "our adoption as sons" in verse 23, he is thinking of the special Roman custom of adoption and

not of what we usually think of when someone uses that word. The Romans (as well as the Greeks) had adoption in our sense, that is, when a child is taken out of one family and is placed into another. But the Romans also had an important ceremony in which the son of a leading Roman family would be acknowledged publicly as the son and heir. It corresponded somewhat to the Jews' *bar mitzvah*, when a Jewish boy becomes a "son of the covenant," though among Romans it was less religious and more a matter of adulthood and the right of inheritance.

In the opening pages of Lloyd C. Douglas's religious novel *The Robe*, the young daughter of the Gallio family, Lucia, is reflecting on the day her brother Marcellus was adopted in such a ceremony. Marcellus was seventeen years old. Douglas writes, "What a wonderful day that was, with all their good friends assembled in the Forum to see Marcellus—clean-shaven for the first time in his life—step forward to receive his white toga. Cornelius Capito and Father had made speeches, and then they had put the white toga on Marcellus. Lucia had been so proud and happy that her heart had pounded and her throat had hurt, though she was only nine then, and couldn't know much about the ceremony except that Marcellus was expected to act like a man now— though sometimes he forgot to."

Later Marcellus describes the occasion to a friend named Paulus: "When a Roman of our sort comes of age, Paulus, there is an impressive ceremony by which we are inducted into manhood.... Well do I remember—the thrill of it abides with me still—how all of our relatives and friends assembled, that day, in the stately Forum Julium. My father made an address, welcoming me into Roman citizenship. It was as if I had never lived until that hour. I was so deeply stirred, Paulus, that my eyes swam with tears. And then good old Cornelius Capito made a speech, a very serious one, about Rome's right to my loyalty, my courage, and my strength. I knew that tough old Capito had a right to talk of such matters, and I was proud that he was there! They beckoned to me, and I stepped forward. Capito and my father put the white toga on me— and life had begun!"

As I say, I am convinced that this is what Paul has in mind in verse 23. You will recall that earlier he had spoken of our being "heirs of God and coheirs of Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings" (v. 17). We are sharing in the sufferings now, but the day is coming when we shall enter into the full rights of our inheritance in glory.

Firstfruits and the Full Harvest

The third picture of the consummation to which believers in Christ are moving is a harvest, suggested by the words "firstfruits of the Spirit." This does not refer to the fruit of the Spirit, as Paul does in Galatians ("But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control," Gal. 5:22-23). It refers to the Holy Spirit himself as the "firstfruits," which is a harvest image drawn from Jewish life.

The custom is described in Leviticus 23:9-14, which says in part, "When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath" (vv. 10, 11). The portion of the harvest presented to the priest was called the firstfruits, and it was in the nature of an offering that consecrated the entire harvest. In this Old Testament ceremony the firstfruits were something the devout Jewish worshiper gave God. But in the New Testament Paul usually reverses this and speaks of the firstfruits as what God gives us as an earnest or down payment on the full blessings to come.

The full blessing is the harvest, a joyful time for which those who labor are willing to endure great hardship.

John Stott sums this up by saying, "So the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of sonship and makes us the children of God (v. 15), and then witnesses with our spirit that we are God's children (v. 16), is also himself the pledge of our complete adoption to be the sons of God, when our bodies are redeemed." In this, as also in the development of the other two themes, we are reminded of some of the things Paul said earlier.

Hope and Patient Endurance

At the beginning of this study I discussed the word *groan*, pointing out that it is used of the creation, ourselves, and the Holy Spirit. I said that the usage we understand best is our own groaning, since we groan in our bodily weakness and fleshly sins. But groaning is not the only thing Paul says we do. He also says that "we hope" (v. 25) and "we wait" (vv. 23, 25), adding in the later case that we do it both "eagerly" and "patiently."

1. *We hope*. Hope is one of the very great words of the Christian vocabulary, occurring in such important phrases as our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) and "the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). It is one of the three great virtues listed in 1 Corinthians 13:13 ("These three remain: faith, hope and love"). Paul has already written about hope in Romans 5: "... we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (vv. 3-5).

The word *hope* has two senses: (1) an attitude of hopefulness, and (2) the content of that for which we hope. Both uses of the word occur in our text, the idea of content in verse 24 ("in this hope we were saved") and the attitude of hopefulness in verses 24 and 25 ("we hope").

What is striking about the Christian attitude of hopefulness is that it is a "sure and certain hope" and not mere wishful thinking. What makes it sure and certain is the content. The specific content is the return of Jesus Christ together with the things we have been mentioning in these verses: the resurrection of the body, the adoption of God's children, and the gathering of God's harvest. These things are all promised to us by God. Hence, the Christian hopes in confidence, a confidence grounded not in the strength of one's emotional outlook but on the sure Word of God, who cannot lie. If God says that these things are coming, it is reasonable and safe for us to hope confidently in them.

2. *We wait.* More specifically, we wait for them, which is the second verb Paul uses. Verse 23 says, "We wait eagerly." Verse 25 says, "We wait... patiently." It is important to take the two adverbs together, because biblical "patience" is not passivity. This is an active, though patient waiting. It expresses itself in vigorous service for Christ even while we wait for his appearing.

The word *eagerly* makes us think of the creation waiting ("in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed," which Paul introduced in verse 19, though the Greek words are not the same. In verse 19 Paul pictured creation standing on tiptoe, as it were, looking forward with outstretched neck in eager anticipation of the consummation. It is a grand picture, and it is what we are to be doing, too. It is one mark of a true Christian.

Here is how D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it:

Hope is the measure of true Christianity, which is through and through other-worldly. PseudoChristianity always looks chiefly at this world. Popular Christianity is entirely this-worldly and is not interested in the other world. But true Christianity has its eye mainly on the world which is to come. It is not primarily concerned even with deliverance from hell, and punishment, and all the things that trouble us and weary us. That really belongs to the past. True Christianity "sets its affection on things which are above, not on things which are on the earth." It is that which says, "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17, 18).

Paradoxically, of course, it is only these heavenly-minded people who are able to make any real or lasting difference in the world.

Chapter 107.
The Holy Spirit's Help in Prayer

Romans 8:26-27

I do not know of any subject that has caused more perplexity for more Christians than the subject of prayer, unless perhaps it is the matter of knowing God's will. And, of course, the two are related. They are related in this text as well as in other places, for the verses we are now studying speak of the Holy Spirit's help in prayer, concluding that "he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints *in accordance with God's will*" (v. 27, emphasis added).

Christians who want to pray in accordance with God's will find themselves asking: What should I pray for? How should I pray? Can I pray with confidence, "claiming" things by faith? Or do I have to make my prayers tentative, adding always, "If it be your will"?

What happens if I pray wrongly? Can prayer do harm? Does prayer get God to change his mind? Can it change God's plans? If not, does it even matter if I pray?

As I say, I do not know any subject that has caused more perplexity and been more of a continuing problem for more believers than this one. But we have help in this area, the help of the Holy Spirit, which is great indeed. It is what Romans 8:26 and 27 are about.

"In the Same Way"

These verses begin with the phrase "in the same way." So we first need to ask what this refers to. It is a connecting phrase, of course, and most of the commentators link it to what immediately precedes. That is, they link it to the Christian's hope. The idea seems to be that we endure sufferings in this life but that we are able to handle them in two ways: first, by hope, that is, by a sure and patient looking forward to the final redemption of our bodies; and second, by the help of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

That is a valid connection, of course. But I think that D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is right when he links the apostle's teaching about prayer in verses 26-27 to his teaching about prayer in verses 15-17. The earlier passage

taught that the Holy Spirit enables us to pray, assuring us that we truly are God's children and encouraging us to cry out "*Abba,* Father." That teaching was followed by an extensive digression dealing with the sufferings endured in this life before we come into God's presence. But then, having dealt with sufferings, Paul returns once more to the Spirit's work in enabling us to pray, adding that the Spirit also "helps us in our weakness" (v. 26).

In other words, Paul returns to the subject of assurance, which is the chapter's main theme. The point of these two verses is that the Holy Spirit's help in prayer is another way we can know that we are God's children and that nothing will ever separate us from his love.

Is Prayer a Problem?

A number of years ago the Bible Study Hour, on which I am the speaker, offered a small booklet containing several messages by another writer and myself and entitled "Is Prayer a Problem?" For most people it obviously is, as I suggested above. So the most important question is not the one in the title of that booklet but rather: *Why* is prayer a problem? Furthermore, what's to be *done* about it? At this point our text is extremely helpful.

Let's take the first question—Why is prayer a problem?—and deal with that. Paul answers that it is because of "our weakness."

When Paul speaks of our weakness, it is important to realize that he is not speaking of sin. Weakness is not sin. It is true that we are sinners and often sin and that sin is a barrier to communication with God. David said of his prayer life, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). Isaiah told the Israelites, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isa. 59:2a). But that is not what is being spoken of here. The problem Paul is concerned with is weakness, and this is not sin but rather is grounded in our frailty as human beings.

What kinds of weakness are there? *Physical weakness* is one kind. The story of the disciples who were left by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray provides one illustration. They kept falling asleep even though Jesus had instructed them to stay awake and pray with him.

But in Romans 8 the weakness Paul has in mind is *ignorance* or a *lack of understanding.* It is expressed in the fact that "we do not know what we ought to pray for." This is not a question of *how* to pray but of *what* to pray. Paul means that we do not know what we should ask of God. What is God's will for us or others? In our human limitations we simply do not know and therefore do not know how to pray rightly.

Notice that when Paul writes the word *weakness* he adds the word *our,* thereby putting himself in an identical position. In other words, the weakness that makes prayer difficult is not something that only new, baby, or immature Christians have. It is part of our common human condition.

Even the greatest saints have had this difficulty.

Let me offer four illustrations.

First, there is the case of Job. I pick Job because he had the testimony of God that he was a righteous man: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). There was no outstanding sin in Job that might have been a barrier between him and God. Yet, because of the things that happened to him, Job was a confused man. He did not know why he was suffering as he was. His comforters thought they knew. They would not have had any difficulty praying, at least about Job. They had it all figured out—incorrectly. Job, who knew his heart, had no answers. He prayed, "Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?..." (Job. 7:20b-21).

Elijah is another example. This great prophet was a courageous man, having stood against the powerful prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and by God's provision having won a great victory. Yet after the battle

he was so emotionally and physically drained that he retreated to the desert fearing Jezebel, who had threatened to kill him. What did he pray? He asked to die, arguing, "I have had enough, LORD. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4). That much was true; he was no better. But it was still a confused and foolish prayer, since God had more for him to do.

Job teaches that a man can be righteous and still not know what to pray. Elijah teaches that a person can be courageous and have the same problem.

A third example is Mary Magdalene. Her chief characteristic was love. She loved Jesus greatly. Still, love was no defense against ignorance or a lack of understanding. She had not the faintest idea what God was doing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. So when she met Jesus in the garden after the resurrection, thinking him to be the gardener, she asked, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him" (John 20:15). She was deeply devout, yet confused nonetheless.

And what about Jesus himself? This is a bold example; we have to be cautious how we use it. But we remember that in his flesh Jesus was subject to physical limitations, as we are. He grew hungry and tired as we do. He does not seem to have known everything (see Matt. 24:36). As for his praying, we know that in the garden he prayed for up to three hours that the cup of the wrath of God poured out against sin might be taken from him *if* it was God's will (Matt. 26:36-46). Jesus came to a position of quiet trust and confidence as a result of that prayer time. Still, we might say that he was praying for a while at least for something that turned out not to be God's will for him.

Is it any wonder that we have problems knowing what to pray for?

The "Burden Bearer"

But enough of the problem. We know it all too well. The point of the passage is that the Spirit "helps us" in the weaknesses I have been describing and, though we do not know what we should pray, he

"intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." We are weakness itself, but the Holy Spirit is all-powerful.

The first Greek word Paul uses for the Spirit's role in prayer is a long one, and the simple English translation "helps" does not even come close to doing it justice. The word is *sunantilambanetai*. Like many long Greek words it is put together from a few shorter ones, in this case three. The first is *sun*. It means "with," "along with," or "together with." The second word is *anti*. It means
"for" or "in the place of." The main word, the verb, is *lambanō*. It means "to take," "take hold of," "remove," or "bear." All together the word refers to a person coming alongside another to take part of a heavy load and help him bear it.

This reminds us of the word Jesus used to describe the Spirit when he prophesied his coming to the disciples just before his crucifixion. He called him a *paraklētos*, which literally means "one called alongside of another" to help. It is sometimes translated "advocate" (which also means "to call alongside of), or "comforter."

The idea of the Holy Spirit coming alongside a Christian to help is the same in both cases. But the special meaning in the word used here in Romans is to help by bearing the Christian's burden. It pictures our ignorance of what to pray for as a heavy load. We are struggling along under it, as it were. But the Holy Spirit comes alongside and helps us shoulder the load. He identifies with us in our weakness, as Jesus did by his incarnation, and he labors with us.

The second word Paul uses is intercession, saying that "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." An intercessor is a person who pleads one's case. So the meaning is that the way the Holy Spirit comes alongside us to help and shoulder our burden is by pleading our case with God when we do not know how to do it. We do not know what to pray for, but the Holy Spirit does. So he prays for us, and God "who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit" and answers his very correct and powerful prayers wisely.

Jesus did that for Peter in one of the best illustrations of intercession in the Bible. He told Peter that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. Then he said, "But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). Peter did not know what to pray. In fact, he probably wasn't praying at all. Later that evening he even fell asleep while praying. But Jesus prayed for him, and Jesus' prayers were answered, as a result of which Peter was strengthened and went on to many years of useful service.

But none of this is meant to suggest that we have nothing to do in prayer or have no responsibility to pray. We do have responsibility in prayer, which is made quite clear by the word *helps.* The apostle says that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness." He does not eliminate our need to pray regularly and fervently.

What about the word *groan?* This has been a problem among commentators since they cannot agree on who does the groaning. Is it the Spirit? The text seems to say that. Yet the majority feel that the Spirit, being God, does not groan, indeed cannot groan. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is emphatic on this point: "The Godhead does not groan; it is inconceivable for every reason." However, if it is not the Holy Spirit who groans, it must be the Christian himself. Is this the correct interpretation?

I think the context is a help here and that it is no accident that the word *groan* or *groanings* occurs three times in verses 22-27. The first occurrence refers to the inanimate creation, Paul writing that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (v. 22). The second instance is ourselves. "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly..." (v. 23). Since the word occurs a third time in reference to the Holy Spirit ("the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans..."), there seems to be a meaningful progression from inanimate nature to the redeemed to the third person of the Godhead. It is a bold progression, but it appears to be deliberate.

What does it mean? Obviously it does not mean that the Holy Spirit is unable to articulate his concerns. Yet, if the idea of bearing a heavy burden is still in view, it may be that this is what is governing the apostle's thought. A groan is appropriate to burden bearing.

Suppose you are helping someone carry a very heavy load. What is more expressive: a groan as you stagger along beneath it or a great deal of articulate chatter? Suppose your helper is saying, "My, this piano is heavy. They certainly do make pianos heavy, and awkward, too. Probably we should have spent the money and gone ahead and hired professional piano movers. I don't think I want to do this very often. Have you ever moved a piano before?" If you are struggling with the heavy load, too, that is probably the last thing you want to hear. If someone is chattering away like that, you would probably just want to tell this so-called helper to shut up and lift the piano. A real burden-bearer groans *with* you. I suggest that this is the image Paul is using.

The bearing of our prayer burdens does not have to be in words because, as the passage goes on to say, God "who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit" and answers accordingly.

I think F. Godet has the right progression when he summarizes the three groaning agents in this way:

What a statement of the unutterable disorder which reigns throughout all creation.... Nature throughout all her bounds has a confused feeling of it, and from her bosom there rises a continual lament claiming a renovation from heaven. The redeemed themselves are not exempt from this groaning, and wait for their own renewal which shall be the signal of universal restoration; and finally, the Spirit, who is intimate with the plans of God *for our glory* (1 Cor. 2:7) and who distinctly beholds the ideal of which we have but glimpses, pursues its realization with ardour.

The last words refer to passion that goes beyond mere words.

A First Prayer Primer

Romans 8:26 and 27 imply or explicitly teach so many lessons about prayer that a number of them can be listed as a summary of what we

have been learning. They constitute something of a prayer primer for Christians.

1. *We are supposed to pray.* Regardless of the problems we may have with prayer—and we are reminded that the saints have all had problems with prayer at times—we are nevertheless supposed to pray. In fact, the Word of God commands us to pray. Indeed, we are told to "pray continually" (1 Thess. 4:17). Anything God tells us to do is for our good, and we are poorer if we fail to do it. Prayer is one of the great spiritual disciplines.

2. *Do not expect prayer to be easy.* Why should it be? Nothing else in the Christian life is easy. Why should prayer be any different? When we were studying the last half of Romans 7, I pointed out that the Christian life is a struggle and that we should not expect simple or quick-fix solutions. Our contemporary American culture has conditioned us to want easy cure-alls. In the area of our sanctification we expect immediate victories either by a formula or spiritual experience. But God does not work that way. We are called to a struggle, and our perseverance in that struggle is itself a victory, even if the results are not visible or spectacular. And the Holy Spirit will help us bear our burden.

So also in prayer. You do not have to feel good about it, though you will in most cases. You do not even have to see results. What is important is that you keep on, and keep on keeping on. One bit of verse puts it like this:

> We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;
> We have hard work to do and loads to lift.
> Shun not the struggle; face it; 'tis God's gift.

3. *Realize what you are doing when you pray.* Although the discipline of prayer is itself a struggle and more often than not we do not know what we should be praying for, we nevertheless can know and need to know what we are doing. We are addressing ourselves to the great sovereign God of the universe and are presenting our adoration, confessions, thanksgivings and supplications to him. He

is hearing these prayers and responding to them consistently, perfectly, and wisely out of his own inexhaustible abundance.

Does prayer get God to change his mind? Of course not! No reasonable person would want that—because if God's way is perfect, as it is, to get him to change it would be to get him to become imperfect. If that ever happened, the universe would fall into disorder! Any thinking person wants God always to run things according to his own perfect will, not ours.

But here is a parallel question: Does prayer change things? The answer to that is Yes—because God who ordains the ends also ordains the means, and he has made prayer a means to those ends. He has promised us that prayer is effective. Notice the difference between the two questions.

Does prayer get God to change his mind? No. It does not.

Does prayer change things? Yes, because God has ordained that it should be this way. Jesus has told us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8). James wrote, "... You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2), adding, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16b). Remember, too, that when we are talking about change the chief thing that happens in prayer is that prayer changes *us.*

4. *Be encouraged by these verses.* It is true that "we do not know what we ought to pray for." But the Holy Spirit does, and the Holy Spirit has been given to us by God to assist precisely in this area, as well as in other ways. With his help we will make progress.

One commentator has compared learning to pray to a man learning to play the violin. At first he is not very good. But he gets the schedule of the classical music broadcasts in his area, buys the violin parts to the music that he knows will be played, and then tunes in the radio each afternoon and plays along as best he can. His mistakes do not change

what is coming in over the radio in the slightest. The concertos continue to roll on in perfect harmony and tempo. But the struggling violinist changes. He gets better week by week and year by year, and the time eventually comes when he can play along with the orchestra broadcasts pretty well.

Prayer is like that. There are plenty of mistaken notes, and groans, too. But there is also progress and joy and encouragement, since God is continuing to conduct the perfect heavenly symphony, and the Holy Spirit is continuing to prepare us for the day when we will be able to take our place in the divine orchestra. In the meantime we can know that the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, like a wise and faithful teacher, is by our side.

Chapter 108.
Knowing the Will of God

Romans 8:27

At the beginning of the last study I said that I do not know of any subject that has caused more perplexity for more Christians than prayer, unless it is the matter of knowing God's will. I also said that the two are related. They are related in our text, as well as in other places, for the verse speaks of the Spirit's intercession for the saints "in accordance with God's will."

This verse introduces the matter of "God's will" at the level of the Spirit's part in prayer, not our part. "We do not know what we ought to pray for..." (v. 26). Nevertheless, it shows that there is such a thing as God's will, which inevitably raises the question of our relationship to it. In respect to prayer we ask questions like: What should I pray for? How should I pray? Can I pray with confidence? In respect to God's will we ask such closely related questions as: Does God have a perfect will for my life? Can I know what that will is? If I can, how do I find it? Can I ask God to show it to me? What is my responsibility for discovering it?

I can testify that in my own experience in pastoral counseling over a period of many years, I have been asked more questions about knowing or discovering the will of God than any others.

Alternative Views

A few years ago a very good book on this subject appeared in Christian bookstores. It was written by Garry Friesen, a professor at Multnomah School of the Bible in Portland, Oregon, together with J. Robin Maxson, pastor of the Klamath Evangelical Free Church, Klamath, Oregon. The title is *Decision Making & the Will of God*. It is a good book because it examines the traditional evangelical views about knowing the will of God, critiques them, and proposes a helpful alternative. Let me summarize.

The traditional view distinguishes between three meanings of the phrase "will of God." The first is God's *sovereign will,* which the Westminster Shorter Catechism refers to as his eternal decrees
"according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass" (Answer to Question 7). This sovereign will of God is hidden; it is not revealed to us, except as it unfolds in history. The second meaning of the term is God's *moral will,* which is known to us because it is revealed comprehensively in Scripture. It is what God wants or desires, as opposed to what he decrees. The third meaning is God's *individual will,* a term that refers to God's plan for an individual life and is what people are thinking of most often when they speak of searching for or finding God's will.

In their book Friesen and Maxson rightly accept the first two of these "wills": God's sovereign will and his moral will. But they dispute the third, that is, that God has an individual will for each life and that it is the duty of the individual believer to find it or "live in the center of it." The grounds for their critique are these arguments:

1. The existence of an ideal "individual will of God" for Christians cannot be established by reason, experience, biblical example, or biblical teaching.

2. The practice of looking for such an ideal will has created needless frustration in decision making for many.
3. The traditional view does not work out in most situations, if ever. It is hard to apply in the minor decisions of life or in deciding between genuinely equal options, for example.
4. The traditional view is hopelessly subjective. None of the usual ways of trying to find the supposed will of God are unambiguous: an inner witness, circumstances, counsel, personal desires, or special guidance.

In light of these obvious problems and their own examination of the biblical material, the authors propose an alternative view, which they call "the way of wisdom." A summary of their approach goes like this:

1. In those areas specifically addressed by the Bible, the revealed commands and principles of God (his moral will) are to be obeyed.
2. In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (non-moral decisions), the believer is free and responsible to choose his own course of action. Any decision made within the moral will of God is acceptable to God.
3. In non-moral decisions, the objective of the Christian is to make wise decisions on the basis of spiritual expediency.
4. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches on each decision.

My own evaluation of this book is that it is extremely helpful and is a significant breakthrough in cutting away many of the hangups on this subject that have nearly incapacitated some Christians. Its exposure of the weakness of subjective methods of determining guidance is astute. Its stress on the sufficiency of Scripture in all moral matters is essential. Its proposal of a "way of wisdom" in (most) decision-making matters is

liberating. My only reservation is that it does not seem to deal adequately with special (and therefore also very important) situations.

I want to argue that Romans 8:27 makes an important contribution to this subject.

According to God's Will

The first and very obvious thing this verse does is to reinforce the idea of God's sovereign or hidden will—hidden, that is, from us. Sometimes scholars call this God's "secret" will, because it has not been revealed. It is, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "whatsoever comes to pass."

The existence of this sovereign or hidden will is evident from Romans 8:27 and its context in two ways. First, the verse is talking about the role of the Holy Spirit in praying with us in situations in which we do not know what to pray for. It tells us that the Holy Spirit does know what to pray for and that the Spirit's prayers, quite obviously and naturally, are according to God's will. This teaches that there is a divine will and that it is hidden in these instances. The second way the existence of God's sovereign or hidden will is evident is in the fact that the phrase we are studying has a parallel in verse 28, which says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." The last words, "according to his purpose," are the same thing as "in accordance with God's will" in the preceding verse. So what the Holy Spirit is praying for, among others, are the "things" in which God is working for the good of those who love him. These "things" are the events of life, which God controls for our good but which are unknown to us, at least until they happen.

The context of these verses also deals with the moral will of God or, as we could say, the will of
God for his people as disclosed in Scripture. This is what verse 29 speaks of. For no sooner does Paul speak of God's "purpose" (v. 28) than he goes on to declare in general terms what that purpose is: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." At this

point the sovereign will of God and the moral will of God clearly come together or overlap, for the text is making clear to us that God orders all events according to his sovereign plan in order that his people might become like Jesus Christ.

But let's go back to verses 26 and 27 at this point and ask: Is this what the things "we do not know what to pray for" are? Not exactly! Because if these things are merely our conformity to the character of Jesus Christ, then we already know this and should not be confused about it. We do not need the Holy Spirit's help in praying for the revealed will of God because it has already been revealed to us.

If we do need the Spirit's help, it is clearly in the area of things not revealed and for which we therefore do not know what or how to pray, and since the Holy Spirit prays for us in these areas "in accordance with God's will," there must be a will of God for us in these areas.

We may not know what it is.

We do not need to be under pressure to "discover" it, fearing that if we miss it, somehow we will be doomed to a life outside the center of God's will or to his "second best." We are free to make decisions with what light and wisdom we possess.

Nevertheless, we can know that God does have a perfect will for us, that the Holy Spirit is praying for us in accordance with that will, and that this will of God for us will be done— because God has decreed it and because the Holy Spirit is praying for us in this area.

This should be an encouragement to everyone.

Special Guidance

And yet, it leaves an important question hanging. Does God ever reveal to us specific parts of this plan for our lives? Or to put it another way, Can we expect him to? Should we ever seek such direction? Actually, these three variations on the question have slightly different answers.

Does God ever reveal to us specific parts of his plan for our lives? Yes. Infrequently perhaps, but nevertheless sometimes.

Can we expect him to do? No, if by that we mean that we have a right to receive some special revelation.

Should we ever seek such direction? Of course, but we must be careful how we do it and not become frustrated or be made indecisive if God fails to answer these petitions.

Speaking personally, I have not experienced many specific directions for my life from God, but I have had several, the clearest being my call to the ministry. I was in grade school at the time and had been thinking about being a pastor and Bible teacher. I asked God for a specific sign, and he gave it to me clearly. I did not presume upon it. I recognized that it could have been what many would call coincidence or that I might have misunderstood what God was saying. I anticipated and received additional confirmation along this line as I grew older. Nevertheless I took the sign at face value and moved forward in the belief that God had called me to precisely the kind of work I am doing now. And obviously he had.

Moreover, there is the matter of growth. It is true that we never know entirely what we should pray for and that in some cases we do not have the slightest idea what to pray for. But that does not mean that this is always the case or that we will fail to become increasingly perceptive about the will of God in such matters as we mature. The text says that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, praying for us when we do not know how to pray. Yet obviously we will grow stronger and wiser and will therefore increasingly know better how to pray and what to pray for as the Spirit works with us. This is why Paul could admonish the Ephesians, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Eph. 5:1517).

Remember the illustration of the violin player. It has been helpful to many. If prayer is like practicing the violin, it is also an exercise in coming to discover God's will. It is a way in which we progressively discover what it means to be like the Lord Jesus Christ and in that way increasingly become like him.

A "God's Will" Primer

At the end of the last study I offered what I called "a first prayer primer," listing some points to keep in mind about prayer. It strikes me that it would be helpful to offer a parallel primer on the subject of knowing God's will. This primer has six points.

1. *There is a perfect will of God for all people and all events, and therefore there is also a perfect will of God for each individual believer.* I do not think Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson deny this in their book, although they seem to, so intent are they in denying that there is a unique and special "individual will of God" for us to discover and live out. They say, "The idea of an individual will of God for every detail of a person's life is not found in Scripture."
Therefore, "many believers are investing a great deal of time and energy searching for something that is nonexistent."

But if there is a sovereign though hidden will of God, as they admit, and if it is all-inclusive, as it obviously must be, then it must embrace an individual will for every detail of every person's life, believers as well as unbelievers, even if we do not or cannot perceive it. What Friesen and Maxson probably mean is that this "individual will of God for every detail of a person's life" is not something that is available to us to be discovered.

A person may object at this point that if such a will is not subject to discovery, then whether it exists or does not exist is meaningless. But that does not follow. On the contrary, it is of the greatest importance for us to know that God has a plan for our lives and is directing us in it, particularly when we do not know what it is. It means that we can trust

him and go forward confidently, even when we seem to be walking in the dark, as we often are.

2. *The most important parts of the plan of God for our individual lives are revealed in general but morally comprehensive terms in the Bible.* Romans 8 contains some expressions of this plan, namely that we might be delivered from God's judgment upon us for our sin and from sin's power and instead be made increasingly like Jesus Christ. The decisive steps of God's plan include (1) foreknowledge, (2) predestination, (3) effectual calling, (4) justification, and (5) glorification (vv. 29-30), all of which we will examine in the next few studies.

But there are also many specifics.

The Ten Commandments contain some of these. It is God's will that we have no other gods before him, that we do not worship even him by the use of images, that we do not misuse his name, that we remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy, that we honor our parents, that we do not murder or commit adultery or steal or give false testimony or covet (see Exod. 20). The Lord Jesus amplified upon many of these commandments and added others, above all teaching that we are to "love each other" (John 15:12).

It is God's will that we be holy (1 Thess. 4:3).

It is God's will that we should pray (1 Thess. 5:17).

In the twelfth chapter of Romans Paul will say, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (v. 2).

3. *As concerns the parts of God's will for our individual lives that are not revealed in the Bible, it is impossible for us to know them by any amount of merely human seeking.* This does not mean that God cannot reveal these parts of his will to us or does not in some cases. (More of that later.) But it does mean that the only way we can know these hidden parts of God's will is if he reveals them to

us and that, if they are not revealed to us in general moral categories in the Bible, their discovery is beyond our ability. We will not find the answer to our questions about the will of God in these areas by reading signs, following hunches, bargaining with God, or by any other similar folly.

4. Lest we be discouraged by this, however, we need to realize that *for the most part we do not need to know the will of God in hidden areas, because the Holy Spirit knows it and is praying for us in these areas in accordance with God's will.* This is what our text is chiefly saying, and it should be a great encouragement to us, as I suggested above.

Even if we knew what to pray for and prayed for it accurately or without distortion, and if our ability to walk in God's way depended on such personal prayers and understanding, we would still be uncertain. For one thing, we could not be sure we were praying according to God's will. How could we? We are usually off base on just about everything concerning prayer. For another thing, even if we prayed aright and knew we were doing so, we could still never be certain that we would actually walk in the way revealed to us. On the other hand, if the Holy Spirit is praying for us in these areas according to the sovereign and efficacious will of God, we can be confident and quite bold, knowing that this sovereign and efficacious will of God will be done.

Suppose Peter had been aware of the danger he was in at the time of the Lord's arrest. He might have prayed that God would keep him from falling by denying Jesus. That would have been a good prayer. But it was not what God had in mind for him, and when he actually did fall later Peter would have thought that God had not answered his prayer or had failed him. As it was, Jesus took the part of the Holy Spirit on this occasion and prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail, even though he would be allowed to deny Jesus. And Peter's faith did not fail. Moreover, Jesus prayed that Peter would be restored and that his restoration would enable him to strengthen his brethren when they later went through similarly dark days of failure. That, too, came to pass.

5. *Since we do not generally know God's will for our lives in areas not covered by the Bible's moral directives (and do not need to know it), we must learn to make the wisest decisions possible, knowing that God has given us freedom to do so.* In emphasizing this approach to life's decisions, Friesen and Maxson are entirely right and very helpful.

The authors recognize the proper place of many elements in making wise decisions, including some that they had previously discounted as ways to discover the supposed "individual will of God." They include items like open doors or opportunities, personal likes or dislikes, desires, impressions, and hunches. All these have a place as long as they are recognized for what they are, that is, not special revelations from God but important human factors that should rightly be taken into account. Planning is proper, though we must recognize that God can alter circumstances and thus force a redirection of our plans. Whatever happens, we need to be submissive to the will of God in advance and as it unfolds before us.

6. In spite of these careful remarks regarding the believer's normative guidance, *God is not in a box, and as a result he can (and from time to time does) reveal his will to individuals in special ways.* There are too many Christians who rightly attest to such leading to deny it.

I feel about this matter much as I do about the question of speaking in tongues. I do not believe there is anything in the Bible to teach that tongues-speaking is a gift to be particularly sought after or desired. I do not even believe that much of what passes for this gift today is from the Holy Spirit. I think it is largely psychological. Nevertheless, I cannot follow the hard logic of some, particularly of Reformed people (even though I am one), who argue that tongues cannot occur today because all supernatural occurrences have ceased. I follow Paul, who argues that we are not to "forbid" its practice (1 Cor. 14:39).

Let us think the same about special guidance. We cannot demand it. We recognize that much of what passes for special guidance is self-

deception and must therefore be on guard against it. But we should also recognize that it can occur and be careful not to question it too rigorously in others—and if God guides us in this way, we must be quick to respond.

Part Ten. Unquenchable Love

Chapter 109.
All Things Working Together for Good

Romans 8:28

It is always a humbling experience to study the Word of God, and I have been humbled as I have moved from our last study about knowing the will of God to the tremendous text that is to occupy us now: Romans 8:28. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

It seemed to me that the last study was rather difficult. At any rate, in writing it I had difficulty trying to distinguish between the various ways in which we use the term "God's will" and in trying to suggest what we can know and cannot expect to know about it. But then I came to our text, and the problems I had been laboring with in the last study suddenly seemed quite simple. Earlier Paul said, *"We do not know* what we ought to pray for." Now he writes, *"We know* that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." We do not know! We know! The first knowing concerns the details of what God is doing in our lives; we do not understand these things, we puzzle over them. The second knowing concerns the fact of God's great plan itself. Paul tells us that we do know this; we know that God has a plan. He teaches this quite simply. If God has "called [us] according to his purpose," he must have both a purpose and a place for us in it. Moreover, we know that everything will obviously work together for our good in the achievement of that purpose. This is tremendous! Because of these truths this verse has been one of the most comforting statements in the entire Word of God for most Christians.

Faith and Circumstances

Yet this verse also poses an obvious problem. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him," the text says. But how can this be?

How is this possible when the world is filled with hatred and evil, and when good people, as well as evil people, suffer daily?

Two days before I wrote this study, the ministerial staff of Tenth Presbyterian Church had its regular weekly meeting, and the ministers shared some of the problems they were dealing with. Three days earlier one of our members had been murdered. She was a lovely Korean girl, only twenty-one years old, and she had been very active in Tenth's ministries. Her name was Julee Yang. She sang in the choir, tutored disadvantaged children from one of the city's housing projects, and participated in a young people's group that is focused on the city. Julee worked in a jewelry store and was shot in the back when two young thugs came into the store to steal money. In a surprising turn of events, the murder was captured on a hidden video camera. According to some reports, it was the very first actual murder to have been captured on videotape. The funeral was the day of our staff meeting.

Other staff members shared counseling concerns. One was dealing with a person suffering from extreme personal setbacks, including a case of cancer. She had been thinking of suicide. Another was dealing with a young man who had been diagnosed as having AIDS.

The night before, I had conferred with another pastor who was planning a memorial service for a stillborn infant and wanted to talk about what comfort he could give the grieving parents. That same day, I was to visit another pastor who was under pressure in his church and was quite possibly going to be forced out of it, in spite of nearly two decades of faithful Bible teaching in that place. The combination of these seemingly tragic situations had depressed us all, and we spent a great deal of time praying about them. Later I went to the New Jersey shore, about an hour and a half away, to gain some breathing space and pray for the staff and these problems.

"We know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love him." But do we really know that?

When times are good—when we have steady jobs, when our families are doing well, when no loved one is sick, and there have been no recent deaths—in times like these, well, it is easy to say, "We know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love him." But what about the other times?

What about times like those I was describing?

In such times we need to be sure we know what we are professing and are not merely mouthing pious nothings.

"All's Right with the World"

This great text has some built-in qualifications, and we need to begin with them. I call them

"boundaries."

1. *For Christians only.* The first boundary is defined by a question: To whom does this promise apply? Obviously it does not apply to everyone, for Paul's statement says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." That verse is talking about Christians. So, to read on to the closely linked verses that follow, it is saying that everything works for the good of those whom God has predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, those he predestined and called and justified and glorified. This is not a promise that all things work together for the good of *all* people.

Do you remember Robert Browning's well-known couplet: "God's in his heaven—/All's right with the world"? The lines are a small capsule of nineteenth-century Victorian thinking, when the world was more or less at peace, and progress in all areas of human life and endeavor seemed unlimited and inevitable. Nobody thinks that way today, and rightly so. It is because all is not right with the world, and anybody who thinks so is either out of his or her mind or is just not seeing things clearly.

Several centuries before Browning, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz developed a line of thought known popularly as "the

best of all possible worlds" philosophy. But this, too, was an illusion and still is. For most people this is not the best of all possible worlds at all. In fact, for many millions of people this world and the things they endure in it are terrible.

According to our text, it is only of Christians, not of all people, that these comforting words can be said.

2. *To be like Jesus Christ.* The second boundary to our text comes from another question: What is meant by "good"? That is an important question to ask, because if "good" means "rich," as some would like it to mean, the text is not true, since most Christians have not been given a great supply of this world's goods. The same thing is true if "good" means "healthy." Not all believers have good health. Similarly, "good" cannot mean "successful" or "admired" or even "happy" in the world's sense, since God asks many Christians to endure failure or scorn or very distressing personal experiences or severe disappointments.

What does "good" mean, then, if it does not mean rich or healthy or successful or admired or happy? The answer is in the next verse: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son."

That is what the "good" is: "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son," in other words, to be made like Jesus Christ. That is an obvious good. It is impossible to think of a higher good for human beings, to be like one's Maker. Pastor Ray Stedman rightly calls this "what life is all about." But at the same time, seeing this allows us to see other not so obviously good things within the greater purpose. We can see how sickness, suffering, persecution, grief, or other ills can be used by God for this good end.

3. *A good use of bad things.* That leads to a third boundary for this text, and it comes from a third question: Are the things used in our lives by God for this good end necessarily good in themselves or only in their effect? The answer is the latter. In other words, this

text does not teach that sickness, suffering, persecution, grief, or any other such thing is itself good. On the contrary, these things are evils. Hatred is not love. Death is not life. Grief is not joy. The world is filled with evil. But what the text teaches—and this is important—is that God uses these things (and others) to effect his own good ends for his people. God brings good out of the evil, and the good, as we saw, is our conformity to the character of Jesus Christ.

4. *Knowing rather than feeling.* The fourth and final boundary for the meaning of this text comes in answer to still another question: What is our relationship to what God is doing in these circumstances? The answer Paul gives is that "we know." He does not say that we "feel" all things to be good. Often we do not feel that God is doing good at all. We feel exactly the opposite. We feel that we are being ground down or destroyed. And it is not even that we "see" the good. Most of the time we do not perceive the good things God is doing or how he might be bringing good out of the evil. The text simply says, "we know" it.

Paul was no sentimentalist. He had been persecuted, beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked. He had been attacked and consistently slandered by the Gentiles as well as by his own countrymen. Paul did not go around saying how wonderful the world was or how pleasant his missionary endeavors had been. On the contrary, he reported that he had been "hard pressed on every side... perplexed... [and] struck down" (2 Cor. 4:8-9). But Paul came through the things that pressed down and perplexed him precisely because he knew that God was working out his own greater and good purposes through these events.

How did Paul know it? He knew it because God had told him this was what he was doing. And now Paul is telling us. He is saying that we, too, can know it and be comforted in the knowledge that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him."

The Part Without Boundaries

We have spent the first half of this study looking at four qualifications for this text: (1) that it is for Christians only; (2) that the good is not our idea of the good but God's idea and that it is to be made like Jesus Christ; (3) that the things God uses for this supremely good end are not necessarily good in themselves; and (4) that we can "know" this even though we may not feel or see it. However, having established these boundaries, we can turn joyfully to the one part of the text that has absolutely no boundaries whatever.

It is the term "all things." This tells us that all things that have ever happened to us or can possibly happen to us are so ordered and controlled by God that the end result is inevitably and utterly our good. Even the worst things are used to make us like Jesus Christ.

What is more, when we begin to look at this closely, we see that they are used not only for our good but for the good of other people as well.

Here are three examples.

First, *Joseph.* Joseph's story shows how God controls circumstances. Apart from God's purpose, most of which was hidden from Joseph for a very long time, no one would suspect that God was doing anything good at all. Joseph was a young man favored of his father, with what we would call a bright future before him. His brothers hated him because of his righteousness and their own sin, and they conspired to do away with him. At first they threw Joseph into a dry cistern, planning to leave him there to die. But when some Midianite traders passed by, they seized the opportunity and sold him to them to be a slave. In their turn, the Midianites sold him to a military man in Egypt whose name was Potiphar.

What a horrible experience for a young man. Joseph was only seventeen years old, and he was now a slave in Egypt, where he could not even speak the language. But even this was not all. For a time he prospered as Potiphar's slave. But when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and he refused, Joseph was accused of trying to violate her and was thrown

into prison where he spent the next two years as an abandoned and seemingly forgotten man.

All this, bad as it was, was only the path by which God was planning to raise him to the throne of Egypt to be second in power only to Pharaoh himself.

Pharaoh had a dream. No one could interpret it. Then Pharaoh's chief butler, who had been in prison with Joseph two years before, remembered how Joseph had interpreted one of his dreams. He told Pharaoh, and Joseph was removed from the prison and brought to court, where he easily supplied the explanation. Pharaoh was so impressed that he promoted the former slave on the spot, and Joseph was able to direct the Egyptian grain harvests and store large quantities of grain. Thus he saved many lives during the ensuing famine.

The favor of his father, his dreams, his brothers' hatred, the passing of the Midianite caravan, his being sold to Potiphar, the enthrallment of his master's wife, two years in prison, the Pharaoh's dream—all these diverse circumstances, some quite evil in themselves, were used by God for the great and ultimate good of Joseph and others.

His own testimony, uttered years later in a reassuring conversation with his eleven brothers, who had since been reunited to him, was this: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:19-20).

Second, *Job.* From the world's point of view the story of Job is one of the saddest in the Bible. Job was a mature and upright man, one who feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and his wealth consisted of seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys. He had many servants. Then, suddenly, in one day all this was taken from him. Raiders carried off the donkeys and oxen. Lightning killed the sheep. Chaldean bandits stole the camels and killed the servants. Finally, a building collapsed and his children were all killed in an instant.

Satan, who was behind this, stood back and expected Job to curse God for his ill fortune. But instead Job "fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart/The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised'" (Job 1:21).

The next stage of the story tells how Job was afflicted with ill health, being covered with boils from his head to his feet. Then his friends heaped even greater pain on him by their shallow counsel. Job did not understand this at all. Even at the end of the story, when God restored his wealth and gave him a new family, he seems not to have known what God was doing. God was developing Job's character and confounding the supposed wisdom of Satan, who had said that God's people serve him only because he makes them prosperous. Job did not see this or feel it. But everything was nevertheless working together for good in the life of this great patriarch.

Third, *Peter.* Peter sinned in his pride, telling Jesus that although the other disciples might deny him, Peter at least would not. Not Peter! Then, he, too, sinned in his weakness, doing precisely what he had told Jesus he would not do. Peter denied the Lord three times, the last time with oaths and cursings.

What was the outcome? Jesus turned even these very bad things to good. He interceded for Peter so that the apostle's faith would not fail, and he asked the Father to order things so that, when Peter was restored, he would be stronger for his fall and able to strengthen his brethren. This is what Peter did, for later he wrote to other Christians:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time

for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

1 Peter 4:12-19

All Things

Years ago I had a watch that my father had given me when I graduated from high school. It was an unusual watch in that its back was transparent. You could look into it and see the mechanism working and the wheels turning. Some wheels went forward. Some went backward. Some turned quickly, others slowly. There was a large mainspring and a few small hairsprings. There were levers that were popping up and down.

The Christian life is like the parts of that watch. At times the events of our lives move forward quickly and we sense that we are making fast progress in being made like Jesus Christ. At other times events move slowly, and we seem to be going slowly ourselves or even slipping backward. Sometimes we seem to be going up and down with no forward motion at all. At such times we say that our emotions are on a roller coaster or that we just can't seem to get on track. Our lives have petty annoyances that spoil our good humor. Sometimes we are overwhelmed with harsh blows, and we say that we just can't go on. It may be true; perhaps we really can't go on, at least until we are able to pause and catch our spiritual breath again.

But God has designed this timepiece of ours—this plan for our lives. That is the point. It has been formed "according to his purpose," which is what our text is about, and it is because we *know* this, not because we feel it or see it, that we can eventually go on.

What can possibly come into our lives that can defeat God's plan?

There are many things that can defeat human planning. Our plans are often overturned by our sins and failures, others' opposition or jealousy, circumstances, or our own indifference. But not God's plans. He is the sovereign God. His will is forever being done. Therefore, you and I can go on in confidence, even when we are most perplexed or cast down.

What can happen to me that can defeat God's purpose?

Can some thorn in the flesh? Something to prick or pain me? Paul had his thorn in the flesh, but God's grace was sufficient for him and it was in his weakness that God was glorified.

Sickness? Job had boils, but God glorified himself in Job's sickness and even matured Job.

Death? How can death hurt me? "To be away from the body" is to be "at home with the Lord," says Paul (2 Cor. 5:8). Therefore, my physical death will only consummate the plan of God for me. And as far as those who remain behind are concerned, well, God will work his will for good for them also. No one is indispensable, so if I should die this afternoon, the next service of Tenth Presbyterian Church would still be held. The gospel would still be preached. Christians would still be strengthened and unbelievers won. This is because "in all things God works for the good of those who love him."

Chapter 110.
A Golden Chain of Five Links

Romans 8:29-30

When I was writing about Romans 8:28 in the previous study, I said that for most Christians that verse is one of the most comforting statements in the entire Word of God. The reason is obvious. It tells us that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." That is, God has a great and good

purpose for all Christians and he is working in all the many detailed circumstances of their lives to achieve it.

Wonderful as that verse is, the verses that follow are even more wonderful, for they tell how God *accomplishes* this purpose and remind us that it is *God himself* who accomplishes it. The last reminder is the basis for what is commonly known as "eternal security" or "the perseverance of the saints."

Some time ago I came across an amusing but apparently true story. In 1966 the Hindu holy man and mystic Rao announced that he would walk on water. This attracted a great deal of attention, and on the day set for the feat a great crowd gathered around a large pool in Bombay, India, where it was to occur. The holy man prayerfully prepared himself for the miracle and then stepped forward to the pool's edge. A solemn hush fell over the assembled observers. Rao glanced upward to heaven, stepped forward onto the water, and then immediately plummeted into the pool's depths. Sputtering, dripping wet, and furious, he emerged from the pool and turned angrily on the embarrassed crowd. "One of you," he said, "is an unbeliever."

Fortunately, our salvation is not like that, because if it were, it would never happen. In spiritual matters we are all unbelievers. We are weak in faith. But we are taught in these great verses from Romans that salvation does not depend upon our faith, however necessary faith may be, but on the purposes of God.

And it is the same regarding love. The apostle has just said that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. But lest we somehow imagine that the strength of our love is the determining factor in salvation, he reminds us that our place in this good flow of events is not grounded in our love for God but on the fact that he has fixed his love upon us.

How has God loved us?

Let me count the ways.

These verses introduce us to five great doctrines: (1) foreknowledge, (2) predestination, (3) effectual calling, (4) justification, and (5) glorification. These five doctrines are so closely connected that they have rightly and accurately been described as "a golden chain of five links." Each link is forged in heaven. That is, each describes something God does and does not waver in doing. This is why John R. W. Stott calls them "five undeniable affirmations." The first two are concerned with God's eternal counsel or past determinations. The last two are concerned with what God has done, is doing, or will do with us. The middle term ("calling") connects the first pair and the last.

These doctrines flow from eternity to eternity. As a result, there is no greater scope given to the wonderful activity of God in salvation in all the Bible.

Divine Foreknowledge

The most important of these five terms is the first, but surprisingly (or not surprisingly, since our ways are not God's ways nor his thoughts our thoughts), it is the most misunderstood. It is composed of two separate words: "fore," which means beforehand, and "knowledge." So it has been taken to mean that, since God knows all things, God knows beforehand who will believe on him and who will not, as a result of which he has predestined to salvation those whom he foresees will believe on him. In other words, what he foreknows or foresees is their faith.

Foreknowledge is such an important idea that we are going to come back to it again in the next study and carefully examine the way it is actually used in the Bible. But even here we can see that such an explanation can never do justice to this passage.

For one thing, the verse does not say that God foreknew what certain of his creatures would do. It is not talking about human actions at all. On the contrary, it is speaking entirely of God and of what God does. Each of these five terms is like that: *God* foreknew, *God* predestined, *God* called, *God* justified, *God* glorified. Besides, the object of the divine

foreknowledge is not the actions of certain people but the people themselves. In this sense it can only mean that God has fixed a special attention upon them or loved them savingly.

This is the way the word is frequently used in the Old Testament, Amos 3:2, for example. The
King James Version translates God's words here literally, using the verb "know" (Hebrew, *yāda*): "You only have I known of all the families of the earth...." But so obvious is the idea of election in this context that the New International Version sharpens the meaning by translating: "You only have I chosen...."

And there is another problem. If all the word means is that God knows beforehand what people will do in response to him or to the preaching of the gospel and then determines their destiny on that basis, what, pray tell, could God possibly see or foreknow except a fixed opposition to him on the part of *all* people? If the hearts of men and women are as depraved as Paul has been teaching they are—if indeed "'There is no one righteous, not even one... no one who understands, no one who seeks God'" (Rom. 3:10-11)—what could God possibly foresee in any human heart but unbelief?

John Murray puts it in a complementary but slightly different way: "Even if it were granted that 'foreknew' means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. For it is certainly true that God foresees faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith, which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates (cf. John 3:3-8; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Peter 1:2). Hence his eternal foresight of faith is preconditioned by his decree to generate this faith in those whom he foresees as believing."

Foreknowledge means that salvation has its origin in the mind or eternal counsels of God, not in man. It focuses our attention on the distinguishing love of God, according to which some persons are

elected to be conformed to the character of Jesus Christ, which is what Paul has already been saying.

Foreknowledge and Predestination

The chief objection to this understanding of foreknowledge is that, if it is correct, then foreknowledge and predestination (the term that follows) mean the same thing and Paul would therefore be redundant. But the terms are not synonymous. Predestination carries us a step further.

Like foreknowledge, predestination is also composed of two separate words: "pre," meaning beforehand, and "destiny" or "destination." It means to determine a person's destiny beforehand, and this is the sense in which it differs from foreknowledge. As we have seen, foreknowledge means to fix one's love upon or elect. It "does not inform us of the destination to which those thus chosen are appointed." This is what predestination supplies. It tells us that, having fixed his distinguishing love upon us, God next appointed us "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." He does this, as the next terms show, by calling, justifying, and glorifying those thus chosen.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out that the Greek word that is translated "predestined" has within it the word for "horizon" (Greek, *proōrizō*). The horizon is a dividing line, marking off and separating what we can see from what we cannot see. Everything beyond the horizon is in one category; everything within the horizon is in another. Lloyd-Jones suggests therefore that what the word signifies is that God, having foreknown certain people, takes them out of the far-off category and puts them within the circle of his saving purposes. "In other words," he says, "he has marked out a particular destiny for them." That destiny is to be made like Jesus Christ.

Two Kinds of Calling

The next step in this golden chain of five links is what theologians call effectual calling. It is important to use the adjective *effectual* at this point, because there are two different kinds of calling referred to in the Bible, and it is easy to get confused about them.

One kind of calling is external, general, and universal. It is an open invitation to all persons to repent of sin, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved. It is what Jesus was speaking of when he said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Or again, when he said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). The problem with this type of call is that, left to themselves, no men or women ever respond positively. They hear the call, but they turn away, preferring their own ways to God. That is why Jesus also said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him..." (John 6:44).

The other kind of call is internal, specific, and effectual. That is, it not only issues the invitation, it also provides the ability or willingness to respond positively. It is God's drawing to himself or bringing to spiritual life the one who without that call would remain spiritually dead and far from him.

There is no greater illustration of this than Jesus' calling of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, who had died four days before. Lazarus in his grave is a picture of every human being in his or her natural state: dead in body and soul, bound with graveclothes, lying in a tomb, sealed with some great stone. Let's call to him, "Lazarus, Lazarus. Come forth, Lazarus. We want you back. We miss you. If you will just get up out of that tomb and return to us, you'll find that we are all anxious to have you back. No one here is going to put any obstructions in your way."

What? Won't Lazarus come? Doesn't he want to be with us?

The problem is that Lazarus does not have the ability to come back. The call is given, but he cannot come.

Ah, but let Jesus take his place before the tomb. Let Jesus call out, "Lazarus, come forth," and the case is quite different. The words are the

same, but now the call is no mere invitation. It is an effectual calling. For the same God who originally called the creation out of nothing is now calling life out of death, and his call is heard. Lazarus, though he has been dead four days, hears Jesus and obeys his Master's voice.

That is how God calls those whom he has foreknown and predestined to salvation.

Calling and Justification

The next step in God's great chain of saving actions is justification. We spent a great deal of time discussing justification in volume 1 of this series, so we need not discuss it in detail here. Briefly, it is the judicial act by which God declares sinful men and women to be in a right standing before him, not on the basis of their own merit, for they have none, but on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done for them by dying in their place on the cross. Jesus bore their punishment, taking the penalty of their sins upon himself. Those sins having been punished, God then imputes the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ to their account.

What does need to be discussed here is the relationship of the effectual call to justification. Or to put it in the form of a question: Why does Paul place calling where he does in this chain? Why does calling come *between* foreknowledge and predestination, on the one hand, and justification and glorification, on the other?

There are two reasons.

First, calling is the point at which the things determined beforehand in the mind and counsel of God pass over into time. We speak of "fore" knowledge and "pre" destination. But these two time references only have meaning for us. Strictly speaking, there is no time frame in God. Because the end is as the beginning and the beginning is as the end, "fore" and "pre" are meaningless in regard to him. God simply "knows" and "determines," and that eternally. But what he thus decrees in eternity becomes actual in time, and calling is the point where his eternal foreknowledge of some and his predestination of those to salvation finds what we would call concrete manifestation. We are

creatures in time. So it is by God's specific calling of us to faith in time that we are saved.

Second, justification, which comes after calling in this list of divine actions, is always connected with faith or belief, and it is through God's call of the individual that faith is brought into being. God's call creates or quickens faith. Or, as we could perhaps more accurately say, it is the call of God that brings forth spiritual life, of which faith is the first true evidence or proof.

Romans 8:29-30 does not contain a full list of the steps in a person's experience of salvation, only five of the most important steps undertaken by God on behalf of Christians. If the text were to include all the steps, what theologians call the *ordo salutis*, it would have to list these:
foreknowledge, predestination, calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. The full list makes the point. After predestination, the very next thing is our calling, out of which comes faith which leads to justification.

The Bible never says that we are saved *because of our* faith. That would make faith something good in us that we somehow contribute to the process. But it does say that we are saved *by* or *through* faith, meaning that God must create it in us before we can be justified.

Glorified (Past Tense)

Glorification is also something we studied earlier, and we are going to come back to it again before we complete these studies of Romans 8. It means being made like Jesus Christ, which is what Paul said earlier. But here is one thing we must notice. When Paul mentions glorification, he refers to it in the past tense ("glorified") rather than in the future ("will glorify") or future passive tense ("will be glorified"), which is what we might have expected him to have done.

Why is this? The only possible but also obvious reason is that he is thinking of this final step in our salvation as being so certain that it is

possible to refer to is as having already happened. And, of course, he does this deliberately to assure us that this is exactly what will happen. Do you remember how he put it in writing to the Christians at Philippi? He wrote, "I always pray with joy... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:4, 6). That is shorthand for what we are discovering in Romans. God began the "good work" by foreknowledge, predestination, calling, and justification. And because he never goes back on anything he has said or changes his mind, we can know that he will carry it on until the day we will be like Jesus Christ, being glorified.

All of God

I have a simple conclusion, and it is to remind you again that these are all things God has done. They are the important things, the things that matter. Without them, not one of us would be saved. Or if we were "saved," not one of us would continue in that salvation.

Do we have to believe? Of course, we do. Paul has already spoken of the nature and necessity of faith in chapters 3 and 4. But even our faith is of God or, as we should probably better say, the result of his working in us. In Ephesians Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:9). When we are first saved we think naturally that we have had a great deal to do with it, perhaps because of wrong or shallow teaching, but more likely only because we know more about our own thoughts and feelings than we do about God. But the longer one is a Christian, the further one moves from any feeling that we are responsible for our salvation or even any part of it, and the closer we come to the conviction that it is all of God.

It is a good thing it is of God, too! Because if it were accomplished by us, we could just as easily un-accomplish it—and no doubt would. If God is the author, salvation is something that is done wisely, well, and forever.

Robert Haldane, one of the great commentators on Romans, provides this summary.

In looking back on this passage, we should observe that, in all that is stated, man acts no part, but is passive, and all is done by God. He is elected and predestinated and called and justified and glorified by God. The aposde was here concluding all that he had said before in enumerating topics of consolation to believers, and is now going on to show that God is "for us," or on the part of his people. Could anything, then, be more consolatory to those who love God, than to be in this manner assured that the great concern of their salvation is not left in their own keeping?
God, even their covenant God, hath taken the whole upon himself. He hath undertaken for them. There is no room, then, for chance or change. He will perfect that which concerneth them.

Years ago Harry A. Ironside, that great Bible teacher, told a story about an older Christian who was asked to give his testimony. He told how God had sought him out and found him, how God had loved him, called him, saved him, delivered him, cleansed him, and healed him—a great witness to the grace, power, and glory of God. But after the meeting a rather legalistic brother took him aside and criticized his testimony, as certain of us like to do. He said, "I appreciated all you said about what God did for you. But you didn't mention anything about your part in it. Salvation is really part us and part God. You should have mentioned something about your part."

"Oh, yes," the older Christian said. "I apologize for that. I'm sorry. I really should have said something about my part. My part was running away, and his part was running after me until he caught me."

We have all run away. But God has set his love on us, predestined us to become like Jesus Christ, called us to faith and repentance, justified us, yes, and has even glorified us, so certain of completion is his plan. May he alone be praised!

Chapter 111.
Foreknowledge and Predestination

Romans 8:29

There are quite a few misunderstandings about Reformed or Calvinistic Christians, and one is that we are always talking about predestination. That is probably not so, though there are Calvinists who like to beat this drum, just as those in other communions like to emphasize certain forms of church government, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or modes of baptism.

This study is about foreknowledge and predestination. But if you are inclined to think that I am overemphasizing these truths by talking about them here, I need to point out that this is the first time in our long study of the Book of Romans that I have explicitly spoken about either. This is my hundred and twelfth study of Romans, but it is the first one specifically addressing these themes. The reason is obvious. This is the first place in Romans at which Paul introduces these two terms. God's foreknowledge of a chosen people and his predestination of them to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ lies behind everything he has been teaching in the first seven and a half chapters. But Paul has not discussed these ideas until he has first presented our desperate condition due to sin and God's remedy for sin through faith in Jesus Christ.

Strikingly, this is also the procedure John Calvin followed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Calvin is known for teaching about predestination. But a discussion of the doctrine does not appear until near the end of Book Three, after more than nine hundred pages devoted to other themes and more than two-thirds of the way through the volume.

"According to His Purpose"

Where do we start in discussing this doctrine? We have already made a start in the last study, showing that foreknowledge and predestination

are two of five great doctrines described as a golden chain by which God reaches down from heaven to elect and save a people for himself.

Yet Paul's own start is in verse 28, where he has written, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Since the word *called* also occurs again as one of the five doctrines in this chain, we are alerted to the fact that the chain of divine actions merely explains how God achieves this purpose. In other words, it is not foreknowledge or predestination that is primary but the purpose of God itself. What is that purpose? Clearly, it is that from the mass of fallen and perishing humanity God might save a company of people who will be made like Jesus.

We could put it like this: God loves Jesus so much that he is determined to have many more people like him. Not that we become divine, of course. Nothing in the Bible teaches that. But rather that we might become like him in his many communicable attributes: things like love, joy, peace, holiness, wisdom, patience, grace, kindness, goodness, compassion, faithfulness, mercy, and other qualities.

In order to do that, God selects, predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies this people. That is, verses 29 and 30 tell *how* God accomplishes the purpose of verse 28.

Foreknowledge

I said in the last study that foreknowledge is the most important of these terms and that it is the most misunderstood. I also said that I would be returning to it to discuss it further, which is what I want to do now.

The problem with this term is that if we break it down into its two constituent parts, the word itself suggests the wrong idea. The first part of the word is "fore," which means "before," and the second part is "knowledge." So the word seems to refer only to knowing something before it happens. Starting from this point, many people have gone on to supply what, in their judgment, God is supposed to know beforehand,

concluding that what he foreknows or foresees is faith. According to such suppositions, it is on the basis of a faith which God foresees that he saves people.

That is not what the verse says, of course. It says that God foreknows people, not what they are going to do, and faith is not even mentioned. In the flow of these verses, what we are told is that God: (1) has a purpose to save certain people, and (2) does something to those people as a first step in a five-step process of saving them.

Actually, as soon as we begin to look at the word carefully, we discover that it is used in a very specific way in the Bible. And for good reasons! When we use the word *foreknowledge* in relation to ourselves, to refer to knowing beforehand, the word has meaning to us. We can anticipate what a person we know well might do, for instance. But that sense of the word is meaningless in relation to God. Because God is not in time, as we are, he does not know things *beforehand.* God simply knows. He knows all things. That is what omniscience means. But even if we think in time categories, which is all we can do as creatures locked in time, we have to say that the only reason God can even be said to foreknow things is because he predetermines them. As Robert Haldane says, "God foreknows what will be, by determining what shall be."

No, the word *foreknowledge* has quite a different meaning in relation to God than it does in relation to us. It means that God "sets his special love upon" a person or "elects" a person to salvation.

This is a characteristic use of the word in the Old Testament. In Amos 3:2, which I mentioned in the last study, the King James Version has the words, "You only have I *known* [Hebrew, *yāda*] of all the families of the earth." That does not refer to God's knowledge in the usual sense of knowing all things, because in that sense God would have to be said to "know" all people and not just the people of Israel. In this verse the word has the meaning "set a special love upon" or "choose." In fact, as I have already pointed out, so obvious is the idea of election in this context that the New International Version sharpens the meaning by translating Amos 3:2 with the words, "You only have I *chosen*...."

We see the same idea when we examine the use of "foreknowledge" (or "foreknew") in the New Testament, where the references occur seven times. Two of these occurrences are of man's foreknowledge, our common usage of the term. Five are of God's foreknowledge, and they are the determining passages.

1. *Acts 2:23.* This verse occurs in the middle of Peter's great sermon on the day of Pentecost, in which he was explaining the plan of salvation to the Jews of Jerusalem: "This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." In this speech Peter is not merely telling his listeners that God knew Jesus would be crucified. That is not the point at all. Rather, he is saying that God sent him to be crucified; that is, that God determined beforehand that this is what should take place. This is what foreknowledge means in Peter's context.

The same idea is present two chapters further on, although in this passage the word *foreknowledge* is omitted. There the believers are praying and say, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles [the "wicked men" of Acts 2:23] and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:27-28).

Both these passages say that human beings were merely carrying out what God had previously determined should happen in order to save sinners by Jesus' crucifixion.

2. *Romans 11:2.* In Romans 9-11 Paul is defending the doctrine of the eternal security of the elect against the argument that it cannot be true since many Jews have not believed in Jesus. There are six or seven answers to that objection in these chapters, and in chapter 11 there is one that includes the word *foreknew.* "I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew" (vv. 1-2).

What does that mean? Does it mean that God does not reject those whom he sees in advance will not reject him? Of course not. That is not what Paul is talking about, and if it were, it would not help his case at all. What he means is that, even in the case of Israel, God has not elected each and every individual to salvation, instead choosing only a remnant, but that those whom he has elected to salvation are kept in that salvation. Paul introduces himself as an example. His argument is that those whom God has foreknown (that is, "chosen") will never fall away or be rejected—the same point he has been making in Romans 8.

3. *First Peter 1:2.* Peter was a great preacher of predestination, and two of the New Testament's explicit references to foreknowledge occur in his first letter. Writing to Christians scattered throughout the Roman provinces of what we call Turkey, he says at the very beginning of his epistle: "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia,

Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (vv. 1-2). Verse 2 does not mean that God chose them because he foresaw that they would believe on or obey Jesus Christ, but rather the reverse. They believed and were being sanctified because God chose them to be saved.

4. *First Peter 1:20.* In verse 20 of the same chapter Peter is speaking of God's determination to send Jesus Christ to be the Savior. The text literally says that God "foreknew him [that is, Jesus] before the creation of the world." But in this verse "foreknew" so clearly means "foreordained" (as in KJV) that the New International Version translators use the word *chosen:* "He was chosen before the creation of the world." In other words, God the Father appointed Jesus to be the Savior even before the creation of man or man's fall.

That same translation could have been used in each of the other passages I have mentioned:

Acts 2:23—"This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and choice (or predetermination)...."

Romans 11:2—"God did not reject his people, whom he chose...."

First Peter 1:2—"[To God's elect] who have been chosen according to the choice (or preordination) of God the Father...."

5. *Romans 8:29.* The fifth New Testament reference to God's foreknowledge is in our text, and the meaning, as I have been arguing, is the same as in the other verses. Romans 8:29 means that God set his special or saving love upon a select group of people in order that his good purpose, namely, to create a people to be like his Son Jesus Christ, might be achieved.

Interestingly, some of the versions, knowing that this is the true meaning of the verb *foreknow,* have tried to suggest it by freer translations. The New English Bible says, "God knew his own before ever they were, and also ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness of his Son." Charles Williams rendered the verse, "For those on whom he set his heart beforehand he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." Goodspeed wrote, "Those whom he had marked out from the first he predestined to be made like his Son." The Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible is particularly sharp. It says, "They [that is, the ones called according to his purpose] are the ones he chose specially long ago." These all suggest the correct meaning nicely.

Predestination

The second of our five golden terms is predestination, the one that bothers most people, though what bothers them is more accurately included in the word *foreknowledge.* That is, that God should set his love upon a special people and save them while overlooking others. Predestination means that God has determined the specific destiny of those he has previously decided should be saved and be made like Jesus.

This is a good place to look at the objections people have to this doctrine, whether described by the word *foreknowledge* or *predestination.*

1. *If you believe in predestination, you make salvation arbitrary and God a tyrant.* Actually, there are two objections here. Let us take the second one first. Does predestination make God a tyrant, crushing justice by some willy-nilly saving of some and damning of others? We can understand how people who know little about the Bible's teaching might suppose this, particularly since they think of God as being unjust anyhow. But anyone who has studied the Bible (or even just the Book of Romans) knows how wrong this is. What will happen if we seek only an even-handed justice from God? The answer is that we will be lost. Justice is what Romans 1 is about. The justice of God condemns us and can only condemn us. If we seek justice from God, we will find it by being cast into outer darkness forever.

In order to be saved, we need mercy and not justice, which is what predestination is all about. It is God showing mercy to whom he will show mercy. As Paul says in Romans 9:18, "... God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

As far as salvation being arbitrary is concerned, we must admit that from our perspective we cannot see why God chooses some and not others or even some and not all, and therefore his foreknowledge and predestination do seem arbitrary. But that is only because we are not God and cannot see as God sees. We cannot understand the full scope of his purposes in saving some and not others, but that does not mean that God is without such purposes. In fact, everything we know about God would lead us to conclude that he has them, though we do not know what they are. What we know about God shows that he is infinitely purposeful in his actions.

Ephesians 1:11 puts predestination in this framework, saying, "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his

will." That is the opposite of being arbitrary. Similarly, in Ephesians 3:10 and 11, Paul says, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

2. *If you believe in predestination, you must deny human freedom.* This is a common objection, but it is based on a sad misunderstanding of the freedom we are supposed to have as fallen human beings. What does the Bible teach about our freedom in spiritual matters? It teaches that we are not free to choose God. "There is... no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:10-11). "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7).

Predestination does not take away freedom. It restores it. It is because God foreknows me and predestines me to be conformed to the image of his Son that I am delivered from sin's bondage and set free to serve him.

The matter can also be looked at practically, in answer to a related question: Does predestination destroy freedom in experience? Sinclair Ferguson answers, "We have a practical illustration in the life of that man who of all men was most clearly predestined by God, namely, Jesus. Jesus was the freest and most responsible man who ever lived. Has there ever been a life in which the sense of God's predestining purpose has been more clearly seen than in our Savior? Is he not spoken of as the elect, chosen and predestined one? Were not his ways determined for him in the pages of the Old Testament? Yet was there ever a freer man in all the universe?" Ferguson summarizes: "We may be told that the doctrine of predestination turns God into a tyrant and man into a slave. But we discover to the contrary that it shows God to be a God of great grace and the children of God to be the freest men and women."

3. *If you believe in predestination, you will destroy the motivation for evangelism. For why should we labor to save those whom God has determined to save anyway?* The theological answer to this is that God determines the means to his ends as well as the ends

> themselves. So, if he has determined to bring the gospel to Mary Jones by a faithful witness to her by Sally Smith, then it is as important and necessary that Sally Smith be a witness to Mary Jones as it is that Mary Jones become a Christian.

But I would rather answer the objection in another way. Suppose God does not elect to salvation and thus, because he has determined to save some, does not commit himself to create new life within them that will break down their hard hearts and enable them to respond in faith to the message of the cross when it is made known. I ask: If God does not commit himself to doing that, what hope do you and I as evangelists have of doing it? If the hearts of men and women are as wicked and incapable of belief as the Bible teaches they are, how can you and I ever hope to present the gospel savingly to anyone?

To put it in even more frightening terms, if salvation depends upon *our* efforts to evangelize rather than the foreknowledge and predestination of God, what if I do something wrong? What if I give a wrong answer to a question or do something that turns others away from Christ? In that case, either by my error or because of my sin, I will be responsible for their eternal damnation. I do not see how that can encourage evangelism. On the contrary, it will make us afraid to do or say anything.

But look at it the other way. If God has elected some to salvation in order that Jesus might be glorified and that many might come to him in faith and be conformed to his image, then I can be both relaxed and bold in my witness. I can know that God will save those he has determined to save and will even use my witness, however feeble or imprecise it might be, if this is the means he has chosen.

Far from destroying evangelism, predestination actually makes evangelism possible. It makes it an expectant and joyful exercise.

Salvation Is of the Lord

As I close, I come back to something I said earlier. All five of these great terms— foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification—refer to things God does. Why is this? That is a meaningful question when we remember that there are also things that we are to do ourselves. Faith is something we do. God does not believe for us. Similarly, sanctification involves our efforts, though it is also of God. Why does Paul not mention these things in Romans 8:28-30?

The answer is obvious. The apostle is dealing with our eternal security, and he is emphasizing God's work so we might understand from the beginning that this wonderful plan of salvation cannot fail. It would if it depended on us. Everything we do fails sooner or later, and that would certainly be true of salvation. Our faith would fail. Our ability to persevere would be extinguished. Our hold on God would weaken, and we would let go and in the end fall into hell.

But salvation is not like that.

It is not our choice of God that matters, but rather God's choice of us. It is not our faith, but his call. It is not our ability to persevere, but the fact that he has determined beforehand to persevere with us to the very end and even beyond.

Chapter 112.
God's Effectual Call

Romans 8:30

My wife Linda and I have many different personality traits, which is a natural thing for husbands and wives, and one of them is the way we respond to someone's call. If we are walking down the street and someone calls out so that we can hear the voice but cannot quite distinguish the words, my wife assumes that the person is calling her and turns around. I assume that the person is calling someone else and keep on going. The same thing is true if a driver of a car blows the horn.

I ignore it; it must be for someone else. Linda thinks someone is trying to get her attention.

I do not know what that says about the two of us, perhaps only that Linda is more "people oriented" than I am and that I am more "task oriented" than she is. But it is an interesting observation in view of the word we need to look at in this study. The word is "called," and it occurs in the statement that "those he [that is, God] predestined, he also called..." (Rom. 8:30).

This word is the next link in the great golden chain of salvation by which God reaches down from eternity into time to save sinners. The point of this word, the third link, is that, unlike myself but like Linda, those whom God calls not only hear his call but actually respond to it by turning around and by believing on Jesus Christ or committing their lives to him.

Calling: External and Internal

But we need to back up at this point and review a distinction I made two studies ago, when I first introduced the golden chain. It is the difference between a call of men and women that is merely external, general, and (in itself) ineffective for salvation, and a call that is internal, specific, and regenerating.

The first call is an open invitation to all persons to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus. As I have mentioned, it was spoken by Jesus himself in many places. For example, he said in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." In Matthew 16:24 he explained, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." He said in John 7:37, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."

This last invitation was spoken in Jerusalem on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, when people from many lands and nationalities were assembled. There were Jews from every part of Palestine as well as from many regions of the Roman Empire. There were also Gentiles,

some who had become Jewish proselytes but also some who, no doubt, were merely interested bystanders. We get a feeling of what this audience must have been like by remembering the composition of the crowd that had assembled at Pentecost when Peter preached the first sermon of the Christian era, likewise extending a general call to all to believe on Jesus. We are told that on that occasion Jerusalem was filled with "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs..." (Acts 2:9-11).

When Jesus (and later Peter) called such people to faith, the call was universal. It was (and is) for everyone. Anyone who wishes can come to Jesus Christ and be saved.

Today that same call flows from every true Christian pulpit and from all who bear witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in every land.

The difficulty with this external, universal, and (in itself) ineffectual call, however, is that if people are left to themselves, no one ever actually responds to it. People hear the gospel and may even understand it up to a point. But the God who issues the invitation is undesirable to them, and so they turn away. Jesus told a story about a man who had prepared a great banquet and invited many guests (Luke 14:15-24). When the feast was prepared he sent servants with the invitation: "Come, for everything is now ready." But the guests all began to make excuses.

"I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it," said one.

"I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out," said another.

A third replied, "I just got married, so I can't come."

That is the way it truly is, since Jesus was not making up this story out of thin air. That was the way the people of his day responded to his

general call. They would not accept his invitation. They rejected it, preferring to go their own ways and about their own business.

One of the great newspaper organizations in this country is the Howard organization, and if you are acquainted with it, you may also be aware of the Howard Company logo. It is a lighthouse beneath which are the words: "Give the people the light, and they will find their way." The idea is that people make foolish mistakes and bad decisions because they do not know the right way. Show it to them and they will follow it, is what the motto means. But that is not the way the
Bible describes our condition spiritually. When Jesus was in the world he was the world's light. The light was shining. But the men of his day did not respond to Jesus by walking in the right path. Instead they hated the light and tried to put it out. They crucified the lighthouse.

This is how people still respond to the universal invitation. It is why Jesus said, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). It is why Paul wrote, "There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:11). And it is why Jesus declared, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him..." (John 6:44).

But this is where the second kind of call comes in, the kind that is actually spoken of in Romans 8:30. Unlike the first call, which was external, universal, and (in itself) ineffective, this second call is internal, specific, and entirely effective. In other words, it effectively saves those —and *all* those—to whom it is spoken.

The best discussion of the effectual call I know is in John Murray's small classic, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied,* where he begins by making the distinction I have just made, showing that there is such a thing as a general or universal call and that there are examples of it in the Bible. But then he points out rightly that "in the New Testament the terms for calling, when used with reference to salvation, are almost uniformly applied, not to the universal call of the gospel, but to the call that ushers men into a state of salvation and is therefore effectual. There

is scarcely an instance where the terms are used to designate the indiscriminate overture of grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ." Here are some examples:

Romans 1:6-7—"And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.... called to be saints."

Romans 11:29—"For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

First Corinthians 1:9—"God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our
Lord, is faithful."

Ephesians 4:1—"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

Second Timothy 1:8-9—"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...."

Second Peter 1:10—"Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure...."

In each of these texts and many others, including our text in Romans 8:30, the call of God is one that effectively saves those to whom it is addressed. Putting the above texts together, it is a call that unites us to Jesus Christ, bringing us into fellowship with him, and sets before us a holy life in which we will be sure to walk if we have truly been called. Putting the call into the context of Romans 8, it is the point at which the eternal foreknowledge and predestination of God pass over into time and start the process by which the individual is drawn from sin to faith in Jesus Christ, is justified through that faith, and is then kept in Christ until his or her final glorification.

Effectual calling is the central and key point in this great golden chain of five links.

The Power of God's Call

Now that we have distinguished between the external and internal calls, we need to ask why it is that the internal or specific call is so effective. Why does it bring those who hear it to salvation? The answer is not at all difficult to find. The reason the effective call *is* effective is that it is God's call. It issues from his mouth, and all that issues from the mouth of God accomplishes precisely that for which he sent it.

This is what Isaiah 55:10-11 teaches us, when it records God as saying:

> "As the rain and the snow come down
> from heaven, and do not return to it
> without watering the earth and making it
> bud and flourish, so that it yields seed
> for the sower and bread for the eater,
> so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
> It will not return to me empty, but will
> accomplish what I desire and achieve
> the purpose for which I sent it."

God's words are always effective. They accomplish their purpose. But to be faithful to our text we need to point out that what we are dealing with in Romans 8:30, in terms of God's calling of sinners, is a call to salvation rather than another purpose. So we need to ask exactly how the effective call of God works in the achieving of this goal.

The chief thing the effective call of God in salvation does is to cause the *regeneration,* or *rebirth*, of the one thus summoned. In the study by John Murray that I referred to earlier, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Murray says that it does not make much difference whether we put regeneration before effectual calling, or effectual calling before regeneration, since the critical determining act is God's in any case. But when the relevant texts are carefully considered, the order nevertheless seems to be as I have indicated. That is, God calls the individual with a specific and effective call, and the call itself produces new spiritual life

in the one who hears it, on the basis of which he or she is enabled to respond to the gospel.

In my judgment, the best illustration of how this works is that of the raising of Lazarus from the dead recounted in John 11, the illustration I introduced in the earlier, introductory study of these terms. We are encouraged to take it as an illustration, because it is in the midst of this story and in obvious reference to it that Jesus utters the well-known words, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die..." (vv. 25-26).

What happens in this story? Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus and calls out to this dead man, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus does. Clearly the call of Jesus created life in the formerly dead corpse, as a result of which Lazarus responded to Jesus by emerging from the tomb.

That is what happens when God calls us to salvation. His call creates spiritual life in the one called, and the proof that spiritual life is there is that we respond to him. How do we respond? We respond by turning from sin—the theological word is repentance—and by believing on Jesus Christ. In other words, the call of God produces life in the sinner, just as the word of God brought the heavens and earth into existence at the very beginning of creation. The first evidences of that new life are repentance from sin and faith in Jesus.

A moment ago I said that, according to John Murray, it makes little practical difference whether we put regeneration before calling, or calling before regeneration, and that is probably true, though the correct biblical picture seems to be calling first, then regeneration. However, this is not the case in regard to regeneration or calling, on the one hand, and faith and repentance on the other. In this case, the calling of God necessarily comes before the fruit of that calling. It is only after God calls and regenerates that one repents of sin and believes the gospel.

Which comes first, faith or life? The person who knows the Bible answers, "Life." Otherwise, salvation would depend on ourselves and

our own ability, and none of the certainties that Paul is speaking about in Romans 8 would be possible.

Some Important Observations

There are a few important qualifications and observations on what I have been saying, and it would be a mistake to overlook them. Let me list three briefly.

1. *Two responses.* I said earlier that the trouble with the general call is that men and women do not naturally respond to it, meaning that they do not become Christians by this call alone. But I need to balance this by adding that, although they do not respond to the call of God unto salvation, they nevertheless can respond superficially by such outward things as coming forward at a religious meeting, making outward profession of faith, or even joining a church. And not only can they, many do. That is why Peter says in the text quoted earlier, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure..." (2 Peter 1:10). He means that we must be sure that we really have been called by God and are truly born again, and have not merely been called by the preacher.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of my predecessors as minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (1927-1960), wrote:

If men heed no more than the outward call, they become members of the visible church. If the inward call is heard in our hearts, we become members of the invisible church. The first call unites us merely to a group of professing members; but the inward call unites us to Christ himself, and to all that have been born again.

The outward call may bring with it a certain intellectual knowledge of the truth; the inward call brings us the faith of the heart, the hope which anchors us forever to Christ and the love which must ever draw us back to him who first loved us. The one can end in formalism, the other in true life. The outward call may curb the tendencies of the old nature and

keep a soul in outward morality; the inward call will cure the plague that is in us and bring us on to triumph in Christ.

2. *The importance of the general call.* My second qualification concerns the importance of the general call. Everything I have said thus far has stressed the necessity of the special, or internal, call of the individual to salvation by God. I have said that no one naturally responds to God on the basis of the general call alone. But now I need to add that although that is true, it is nevertheless also true that the general call is necessary, since it is through the general, or universal, call that God calls specifically.

Let me say it this way: The effectual or specific call comes *through* the general call. That is, it is through the preaching of the Word by God's evangelists and ministers and through the telling of the Good News of the gospel by Christians everywhere that God calls sinners. He does not call everyone we Christians call. We sow the seed broadly; some of it falls on stony or shallow soil, just as some of it also falls on good soil. But when the seed falls on the soil God has previously prepared and when God, the giver of life, blesses the work of sowing—so that the seed takes root in the good soil and grows—the result is a spiritual harvest. People are saved, and they do pass into that great chain of God's saving acts, including foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification, that is outlined in the eighth chapter of Romans.

Let me put it still another way. If God calls effectively through the general call, it is as necessary that there be a general call if some are to be saved as it is that there be a specific and effectual call. Our call does not regenerate. God alone is the author of the new birth. All must be born "from above." Nevertheless, the way God does that is through the sowing of the seed of his Word, which is entrusted to us.

Nobody but God could invent this way of saving human beings. If it were left to us, we would say that either (1) God has to do it; we can do nothing, or (2) we have to do it; God can do nothing. As it is, the work

of effectively calling people to Christ is of God, yet using human beings.

3. *Am I elect?* There is this last qualification. Sometimes people get bogged down by the subject of God's foreknowledge and predestination, and they end up saying, "Well, if God is going to elect me to salvation, he will just have to do it. There is nothing I can do." Or else they get hung up on knowing whether or not they are elect. They say, "How can I know I am elect? If I am not, there is no hope for me," and they despair. This question bothered John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* for a long time and caused extraordinary despair in him.

But there is no reason for either such passivity or such despair. How do you know whether or not you are elect? The answer lies in another question: Have you responded to the gospel? In other words, have you answered God's call?

How do we know that the patriarch Abraham was an elect man? It is because, when God called to him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and go to a land that he would afterward inherit, Abraham "obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb. 11:8), and because he persevered in that obedience to the very end of his life.

How do we know that Moses was predestined to be saved? It is because, though raised in the lap of Egyptian luxury, when he had grown up he "refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter," choosing "to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time" (Heb. 11:24-25). He sided with God's people.

How do we know that Paul was elected to salvation? It is because, though breathing out hatred against God's people and trying to kill some of them, when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, calling, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" the future apostle to the Gentiles was transformed. He saw his sin and turned from it. He saw the righteousness of Christ and believed on Jesus. He obeyed and served God from that time on. Moreover, when he wrote about salvation

later, as he did in the letter to the Romans, he showed beyond any doubt that it was not he who chose God, but rather God who chose him and called him to be Christ's follower.

How do you know if you are among the elect?

There is only one way, and it is not by trying to peer into the eternal counsels of God, stripping the cover from the book of his divine foreknowledge and predestination. The only way you will ever know if you are among the elect is if you respond to the gospel. We are told in the Bible: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved..." (Acts 16:31). Do it. Then you can know that God has set his electing love on you and that, having loved you, he will continue to love you and keep you to the end.

Will you believe? It would be a delight if God would use this study of the effectual call to call you effectually.

Chapter 113.
Justification and Glorification

Romans 8:30

Anyone who is involved in a business of any size knows the necessity of a long-range plan. There are one-year plans, five-year plans, and even ten-year plans. The longer these plans are the more often they need to be reviewed, revised, and updated. An executive who can create an accurate long-range plan, foreseeing most of the contingencies that will affect the company in future years, and then keep on top of it, is an extremely valuable asset to his or her organization.

We have been studying a long-range plan, in fact, the longest-range plan that has ever been devised or could be devised. It is a plan that has had its origins in eternity past and will find its consummation in eternity future. It is all-embracing. Everything that has ever happened or ever will happen in history is part of it. And it is utterly certain. So detailed is this plan and so wisely is it drafted that nothing will ever arise to

upset it or even cause an alternative plan to be necessary. Of course, I am speaking of the plan of God outlined for us in Romans 8:28-30.

This plan begins with God's foreknowledge and predestination, expresses itself in time in the calling of individuals to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, includes justification, and ends in glorification, when these foreknown and predestined persons are made entirely like Jesus. We are to look at the last two steps of the plan in this study.

Justification by Faith

The first term we need to look at is justification, but we do not need to study it in detail here, since it was the chief focus of our study in volume one and has been mentioned many times since.

Justification is the opposite of condemnation. When a person is in a wrong relationship to the law and is condemned or pronounced guilty by the judge, condemnation does not make the person guilty. The person is only declared to be so. In the same way, in justification a person is declared by God to be in a right relationship to his law, but not made righteous. In a human court a person can be declared righteous or "innocent" on the basis of his or her own righteousness. But in God's court, since we humans have no righteousness of our own and are therefore not innocent, believers are declared righteous on the ground of Christ's atonement.

It helps to realize that the full New Testament doctrine is not merely justification alone, though this is the only word Paul uses in his abbreviated listing of it in Romans 8, but *justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.*

That definition has four parts.

1. *The source of our justification is the grace of God* (Rom. 3:24). Since "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10), it is clear that no one can make or declare himself or herself "righteous" (v. 20). How, then, is salvation possible? It is possible

only if God does the work for us—which is what "grace" means, since we do not deserve God's working. Paul frequently emphasizes this by adding the words *free* or *freely* to "grace," which is redundant but nevertheless strong writing.

2. *The ground of our justification is the work of Christ* (Rom 3:25). We saw this in volume one in our discussion of the word *propitiation.* It is because this work has been done that God has been able to justify us justly.

"Justification," writes John R. W. Stott, "is not a synonym for amnesty, which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets (*amnestia* is 'forgetfulness')— wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice.... When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has born the penalty of their law-breaking.... In other words, we are 'justified by his blood.' "

3. *The means of our justification is faith* (Rom. 3:25-26). Faith is the channel by which justification becomes ours. This is not mentioned in the chain of God's saving actions listed in Romans 8:29-30, but it is the fruit of God's effectual calling and its result, which is regeneration. When we are born again we show it by repenting of sin and turning to Jesus Christ in faith, believing that he is our Savior. Two things should be said about faith.

First, faith is not a good work. It is necessary, essential. But it is not a good work. In fact, it is not a work at all. Faith is God's gift, as Paul makes clear in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Second, although faith is the means of our justification, it is also the only means. Luther expressed this by the words *sola fide* ("by faith alone"), thus adding a word not present in the text of Scripture but by it

nevertheless catching the essence of the idea. Clearly, if faith is not a good work but only receiving what God has done for us and freely offers to us, then it is by faith alone that we can be justified, all other acts or works being excluded by definition. The only means by which any person can ever be justified is by believing God and receiving what he offers.

4. *The effect of our justification is union with Christ.* This idea was developed fully in Romans 5 and in an earlier section of chapter 8. It is the ground of the benefits of our salvation unfolded in Romans 5:1-11 and of our victory over sin elaborated in Romans 5:12-8:17.

Stott explains it this way:

To say that we are justified "through Christ" points to his historical death; to say that we are justified "in Christ" points to the personal relationship with him which by faith we now enjoy. This simple fact makes it impossible for us to think of justification as a purely external transaction; it cannot be isolated from our union with Christ and all the benefits which this brings. The first is membership of the Messianic community of Jesus. If we are in Christ and therefore justified, we are also the children of God and the true (spiritual) descendants of Abraham.... Secondly, this new community, to create which Christ gave himself on the cross, is to be "eager to do what is good," and its members are to devote themselves to good works....

To be sure, we can say with Paul that the law condemned us. But "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Hope of Glory

Glorification, the fifth and final term of Romans 8:29-30, is also a word we have studied earlier. In fact, we met the term as early as Romans 5:2 (which anticipates Rom. 8:28-30), where Paul spoke of Christians as rejoicing "in the hope of the glory of God." What does Romans 5:2 mean?

It means that we know that one day we will be glorified and that we rejoice in this certainty. That is, we know that we will be like Jesus. He is God and is therefore like God in all respects; we will be like him. We will not become God, of course. But we will become like him in his communicable attributes: love, joy, peace, mercy, wisdom, faithfulness, grace, goodness, selfcontrol and other such things (see Gal. 5:22-23). In that day sin will no longer trouble us, and we will enjoy the complete fullness and eternal favor of God's presence.

When does glorification take place?

There is a sense in which much of it takes place when we die, for then we will be freed from sin, which has taken up residence in our bodies, and will be like Christ. As John wrote, "... we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Yet I am sure John Murray is right when he insists in his treatment of this word that, in its fullest sense, glorification awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of our bodies. In fact, the text in 1 John, which I have just quoted, says this. It does not say simply that "we shall be like him." It says, "*When he appears,* we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Here is how Murray puts it:

1. *Glorification is associated and bound up with the coming of Christ in glory....* So

indispensable is the coming of the Lord to the hope of glory that glorification for the believer has no meaning without the manifestation of Christ's glory. Glorification is glorification with Christ. Remove the latter and we have robbed the glorification of believers of the one thing that enables them to look forward to this event with confidence....

2. *The glorification of believers is associated and bound up with the renewal of creation.* [This is the teaching of Romans 8:19-22, which we studied earlier. In those verses the glorification of our bodies, which means their resurrection, and the renewal of creation are placed together.]

When we think of glorification, then, it is no narrow perspective that we entertain. It is a renewed cosmos, new heavens and new earth, that we must think of as the context of the believers' glory, a cosmos delivered from all the consequences of sin, in which there will be no more curse but in which righteousness will have complete possession and undisturbed habitation. "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27). "And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:3, 4).

Past Tense, Future Blessing

The most striking feature of Paul's mention of glorification in Romans 8:30 is that it is in the past (aorist) tense, a fact noted when I first introduced this chain of words three studies back. Since glorification is clearly future from our perspective, this requires explanation.

Some commentators think that here Paul departs from strict accuracy or logic in order to stress the absolute certainty of this future event. That is, it is so assured that it can be spoken of *as if it* were past. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says this, writing, "The Apostle's argument is that, as we know most certainly that we have been called and justified, we can be equally certain of our glorification. Nothing can prevent it because it is a part of God's purpose for us." Likewise Leon Morris: "So certain is it that it can be spoken of as already accomplished. It is in the plan of God, and that means that it is *as good as* here."

Other scholars call this use of the past tense an aorist of *anticipation* or a *prophetic* aorist, which is almost the same thing. Since God has decreed it, it will happen and can be considered as having happened. Charles Hodge inclines to this explanation when he says, "God... sees the end from the beginning... so that in predestinating us, he at the same

time, in effect, called, justified and glorified us, as all these were included in his purpose."

F. Godet is also helpful, though to my way of thinking his explanation is probably not quite what Paul has in mind here. He reminds us that there is a sense in which we have been glorified. That is, our federal head Jesus Christ has been glorified, and we are glorified *in him*. If this is the case, the verse would be matched by Ephesians 2:6, where Paul teaches that "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." This does not mean merely that taking our place in heaven is a future certainty but that we have actually already been seated in heaven in the person of Christ. The only reason I say that in my judgment this is not what Paul has in mind here is because in Romans there seems to be a flow from eternity past to eternity future, the middle portion of which dips into time. Paul seems to be describing something that began in the past, has affected us in the present, and will carry us into the future.

If we must make a choice among these three interpretations, I would side with either or both of the first two.

Yet it may be—I think I prefer this—that the chain simply moves back into eternity at this point. We have seen that it begins in eternity and then dips down into time. The flow of the verses would be most satisfying if the chain simply moved back into God's timeless eternity once again, glorification being spoken of as past because it is indeed past (or eternally present) in the mind of God.

What about Sanctification?

As I close my detailed discussion of these specific terms, I want to ask a question that is also raised by Lloyd-Jones in his exposition—wisely, I think. It concerns the one obvious omission in this list: sanctification. Why is sanctification not included, particularly when it is supposed by many to be the central theme of Romans 5 through 8?

I have already addressed myself to the latter part of this question, namely, whether Paul *is* discussing sanctification in these chapters. I did

that at the beginning of this volume, arguing that it is not Paul's purpose to discuss sanctification at all, though much of what he says necessarily touches on it. He is arguing the case for perseverance or eternal security, which is why he introduces the phrase "hope of glory" as early as Romans 5:2. That is the central and important theme, and it comes back at the end, in Romans 8, which is what we are studying now.

But that is not a full answer to the question.

Why not?

Well, Paul has not been discussing foreknowledge, predestination, or effectual calling in these chapters either, yet he mentions those terms here. If they are included, why not sanctification? Again, the apostle is unfolding the flow of salvation from the decrees of God in the past to our glorification in eternity future. Isn't sanctification an indispensable part of that flow? Isn't it as necessary and certain as the other items?

Why, then, is sanctification omitted?

Here are the reasons Martyn Lloyd-Jones offers.

1. *Sanctification is not part of the argument Paul has in mind at this point.* Paul is focusing on the acts of God for our salvation, and his point is that our salvation is certain because it is God who is thus acting. Our security depends upon what he has done, not on what we may or may not be able to do. To put it in other words, our security in Christ does not depend upon our sanctification. Eternal security is not the anticipated outcome of some process. Sanctification is a process while these other items are divine acts. From the point of view of Paul's argument in Romans 8, these are entirely different things.
2. *Sanctification is an inevitable consequence of justification.* Therefore, Paul does not need to mention it. As soon as a person is called by God and is justified, in that same moment sanctification begins. This is because of regeneration or the imparting of a new nature to the saved person. There is no justification without

regeneration just as there is no regeneration without justification. So the one who is justified, who now also possesses a new nature, will inevitably show that new nature by beginning to live a new life. That is why we can say that a claim to justification apart from growth in holiness is presumption.

3. *Sanctification is inevitable also from the standpoint of our glorification.* Indeed, it is a preparation for it. To go back to the text I cited toward the beginning of this study, I note that when John, writing of glorification, says "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is," he immediately adds, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3). In other words, it is the assurance of our glorification that spurs on our sanctification.

What the great Welsh preacher gets out of this (rightly, in my opinion) is that the proper way to teach sanctification is not by concentrating on "me," "my feelings," or certain steps to "personal holiness," but rather on what God has done for us. That is, the proper approach to sanctification is to fix our eyes on God and our minds on the great biblical doctrines.

How do most people teach sanctification today? Either it is by methods ("These are the steps; do this, and you will become holy"), or it is by experience ("What you need is a special filling of the Holy Spirit [or tongues or whatever]").

This is not the biblical pattern. As Lloyd-Jones says:

The way to preach holiness is not to preach about "me" and "my feelings" and to propound various theories as to how I can be delivered; it is, rather, to preach justification and
glorification. By so doing you will include sanctification. Such is the Apostle's method—"whom he justified, them he also glorified." It is because certain people do not know the truth about justification and glorification as they ought that they are defective in their teaching about

sanctification. A man who has his eye on his future state of glorification will spend his time in preparing himself for it.

Suppose you are invited to a party by the President of the United States. If you are normal, you would take some time to get ready, choosing a special dress or suit and making whatever other special preparations might be necessary. In the same way, the fact that we are going to be with Jesus Christ and be like him should influence our behavior and life choices.

When I was teaching on Romans 6:2 and 11, explaining how it is that we have "died to sin," I said that we have died to it in the sense that we have died to the past. And I developed a slogan: *You cannot go back; there is no place for you to go but forward.*

That is absolutely true, of course. We cannot go back. The eternal purpose of God in saving us, unfolded in the five great acts of God described in Romans 8:29-30, makes that plain. But just as it is important to say that we cannot go back, so is it also important to say that we *are* going forward. God's foreknowledge of us is followed by his predestination of us to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. His predestination of us to be made like Jesus is followed by our being called to saving faith. Our calling is followed by our justification. Our justification is followed by our glorification. Therefore, it is as certain that one day we will be with Jesus, and be completely like Jesus, as it is that God exists and that his long-range plan is realistic, effective, and unchangeable.

This is God's great plan. So let's get on with our part in it and be thankful that his grace has drawn us in.

Chapter 114.
The Perseverance of the Saints

Romans 8:30

We are all familiar with the saying about people who can't see the forest for the trees, and you must know people like that. You probably even know Bible teachers like that. I do not want this to be true of our study of Romans 8. So, at this point of our studies, having examined each of the five great terms of verses 28-30 in detail, I want to step back and look at the great doctrine of which they are all only individual parts.

It is not at all hard to recognize what that doctrine is, for we have been mentioning it in one way or another ever since we began the chapter. It is the perseverance of the saints, or eternal security. Or, as some say colloquially, "once saved, always saved." It is the truth that those who have been truly brought to faith in Jesus Christ—having been foreknown and predestined to faith by God from eternity past, having been called, regenerated, and justified in this life, and having been so set on the road to ultimate glorification that this culminating glorification can even be spoken of in the past tense—that these persons will never and can never be lost. Perseverance is implied in each of the terms we have studied, but this is the place to go back and look at the entire forest.

The Biblical Doctrine

Yet we do not want to distort the doctrine by oversimplification, as some do. We want to understand it as it is taught in Scripture—as Paul teaches it in Romans 8, for instance. Therefore, we need to begin our overview by excluding some common misunderstandings about perseverance.

First, perseverance does not mean that Christians are exempted from all spiritual danger, just because they are Christians. On the contrary, the opposite is true. They are in even greater danger, because now that they are Christians the world and the devil will be doggedly set against them and will try to destroy them—and would, if that were possible. We do not need to go very far in Romans to see this fact, for in the next section of this chapter Paul lists some of the hostile forces believers face. He will speak of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger,

and sword, concluding, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (v. 36, quoting Ps. 44:22).

It is because we really do face many spiritual dangers that the doctrine of perseverance is so important.

Second, the doctrine of perseverance does not mean that Christians are always kept from falling into sin, just because they are Christians. Sadly, Christians do sin. Noah fell into drunkenness. Abraham lied about his wife Sarah, saying she was his sister rather than his wife, thinking to protect his own life. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for the murder of Uriah, her husband. Peter denied the Lord. Perseverance does not mean that Christians will not fall, only that they will not fall away.

Jesus predicted Peter's denial. But he added, "I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31).

Third, perseverance does not mean that those who merely profess Christ without actually being born again are secure. This truth explains the many warnings that appear in Scripture to the effect that we should give diligent attention "to make [our] calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). In this area Jesus' statements are among the most direct. He said, for example, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matt. 10:22). We are able to stand firm only because God perseveres with us. But it is also true that we must stand firm. In fact, the final perseverance of believers is the only ultimate proof that they have been chosen by God and have truly been born again.

The Christian doctrine of perseverance does not lead to a false assurance or presumption, though some who claim to be saved do presume on God by their sinful lifestyles and willful disobedience.

Perseverance does not make us lazy.

Perseverance does not make us proud.

No, the real doctrine of perseverance is precisely what Paul declares it to be in Romans 8: that those whom God has foreknown and predestinated to be conformed to the likeness of his Son will indeed come to that great consummation. They will be harassed and frequently tempted. Often they will fall. Nevertheless, in the end they will be with Jesus and will be like him, because this is the destiny that God in his sovereign and inexplicable love has predetermined for them.

The Problem Passages

However, it is not possible to present this doctrine, even in the context of an exposition of Romans 8, without dealing with some of the biblical passages that seem to contradict it. These passages trouble some Christians and are often in their minds when they hear the security of the believer mentioned. Perhaps they trouble you.

Consider, for example, Hebrews 6:4-6, which says, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance...." Doesn't that imply that those who are saved can be lost?

Or what about 2 Peter 2:1-2? "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways...." Doesn't that say that people who have been redeemed by Christ can later deny him and thus fall away and perish?

Or what about Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:27? "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." Are believers subject to "disqualification"?

Or what about the four kinds of soil in Jesus' parable in Matthew 13? Some of the seed springs up quickly, but later it is scorched by the sun

or else is choked by weeds. It perishes.

Or what about the five foolish virgins of Matthew 25? They are waiting for the bridegroom's coming, but because they went away to get oil and were not actually there when he came they were excluded from the wedding banquet.

I am sure you can add your own "problem" texts to these suggestions.

It is important to wrestle with these passages, of course, and not merely dismiss them with some glib statement of "once saved, always saved." Otherwise we will indeed be presuming, and we will miss the very important warnings the texts convey. However, a careful examination of these passages will show that although they can be said to put a proper hedge around perseverance, lest we presume upon it or take it lightly, they do not contradict the doctrine.

Three Categories

How do we approach these difficulties? Martyn Lloyd-Jones does it at great length in more than one hundred pages of careful argument in the second of two volumes on Romans 8. I do not want to take that much space to do the identical thing here. Those who want to examine the matter in greater detail can use the Welsh preacher's work. However, Lloyd-Jones is helpful for us in that he puts the problem texts I have been introducing into a few manageable categories and treats them in that way. In a much briefer manner, I want to follow his procedure. Category 1: *Passages that seem to suggest that we can "fall away" from grace.*

This category contains the most difficult and most frequently cited passages. Therefore, it is the one we need to explore at greatest length.

The first passage is the one in which the phrase "fallen away from grace" occurs, Galatians 5:4. An examination of the context shows that what Paul is addressing is the problem of false teaching that had been introduced into the Galatian churches by a party of legalistic Jews who

were insisting that circumcision and other Jewish practices had to be followed if the believers in Galatia were truly to be saved. Here the contrast with grace is law, and the apostle is saying that if the believers should allow themselves to be seduced by this false teaching, they will have been led away from grace into legalism. This is not the same thing as saying that they will have lost their salvation, though the doctrine of the legalists was indeed a false doctrine by which nobody could be saved. Paul's argument is that the Galatian Christians should "stand firm" in the liberty Christ had given them and not become "burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

The parable of the four kinds of soil also falls into this category of problem texts. Does it teach that it is possible for a person to be genuinely born again and then fall away and be lost, either because of the world's scorching persecutions or its materialistic entanglements? The image we have of young plants suggests this, since the plants in the story obviously do have life. But if we examine Jesus' own explanation of the story, we will see that he makes a distinction between a person who only "hears" the word and a person who "hears the word and understands it" (Matt. 13:19, 23). The one who merely hears may receive the word he does not actually understand
"with joy" and thus seem to be saved. But "he has no root" in him, which he proves by lasting "only a short time." Those who understand and thus have the root of genuine life in them show it by their endurance and fruit.

Jesus' point, since the parable concerns the preaching of the gospel in this age, is that not all preaching of the word will be blessed by God to the saving of those who hear it. Only some will be converted.

Another passage that falls in this category of problem texts is the story of the five wise and five foolish virgins. This is a disturbing parable because it teaches that there will be people within the visible church who have been invited to the marriage supper, profess Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and actually seem to be waiting for his promised return, but who are nevertheless lost at the end. It is meant to be disturbing. But if we compare it with the other parables in the same

chapter—the parable of the talents and the parable of the sheep and the goats—it is clear that Jesus is saying only that in the church many who are not genuinely born again will pass for believers, until the end. It is only at the final judgment, when the Lord returns, that those who are truly saved and those who only profess to be saved will be differentiated.

The most difficult of the passages that seem to suggest that believers can fall away from grace is 2 Peter 2:1-2, which refers to people "denying the sovereign Lord who bought them." This sounds as if Peter is describing people who, having been redeemed by Jesus and having believed in him, later deny him and fall away.

We should be warned against this misunderstanding by the way the chapter continues. Then we see that Peter is actually speaking of people who have learned about Jesus Christ and have even escaped a considerable amount of the external pollution of the world by having the high standards of the Christian life taught to them, but who have repudiated this teaching in order to return to the world's corruption, which they actually love. Peter rather crudely compares them to "a dog" [that] returns to its vomit" and "a sow that is washed" but nevertheless goes back to "her wallowing in the mud" (v. 22). The reason they do this is because their inner nature is unchanged. They may have been cleaned up externally, but like the Pharisees, their insides are still full of corruption. These are the people who deny the Lord who bought them.

But how can Peter say that Jesus "bought" them? As I say, this is a difficult text and has proved so for many commentators. But the answer seems to be that Peter is also thinking of an external purchase or deliverance here. Since he begins by speaking of those who were false prophets among the people of Israel, what he seems to be saying is that just as they were beneficiaries of the deliverance of the nation from Egypt but were nevertheless not true followers of God, so there will be people like this within the churches. They will seem to have been purchased by Christ and will show outward signs of such deliverance, but they will still be false prophets and false professors.

None of these passages teach that salvation can be lost. They are either referring to something else, like falling from grace into legalism, or they are teaching that those who merely make an external profession of faith, however orthodox or holy they may seem, will fall away. As John writes in his first letter, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19).

Category 2: *Passages that seem to suggest that our salvation is uncertain.*

There are a large number of verses in this category, but they are much alike and therefore do not each require separate treatment. For example, there is Philippians 2:12: "... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." And 2 Peter 1:10: "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fail." And also Hebrews 6:4-6, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance."

This last passage, which I have already mentioned, is particularly troubling to many. So let me begin with it. One observation is that even if the text does indirectly teach that a Christian can fall away and be lost, its specific teaching would be that such a person could thereafter never be saved a second time "because [they would be] crucifying the Son of God all over again" (v. 6). Few would want to accept that. So even those who do not believe in eternal security need to find another, better interpretation.

In this case, the answer is in the entire thrust of Hebrews, which was written to Jews who had been exposed to Christianity and had even seemed to accept it somewhat, to go on to full faith and not to draw back again into Judaism. Everything in the book points in this direction. So this "problem" passage is actually talking about people who might

have had a taste of Christianity but who fall away without ever actually becoming true Christians. If this has happened, they cannot come back, because in a certain sense they have been inoculated against Christianity.

However, the real situation emerges in verse 9, where the author of the book writes, "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation." In other words, the author considered his readers to be genuine believers, which meant that, in his opinion, they would not draw back but would go on to embrace the fullness of the doctrines of the faith, as he is urging them to do.

The other verses—Philippians 2:12 and 2 Peter 1:10—are not nearly so difficult. They merely remind us of what I said earlier: that the fact of God's perseverance with us does not suggest that somehow we do not have to persevere, too. We do. In fact, it is because God is persevering with us that we will persevere. Remember that Philippians 2:12, which tells us to "work out" our salvation, is immediately followed by verse 13, which says, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." That is, God gives us the desire and then enables us to achieve what he desires. Category 3: *Warning passages.*

The final category of problem passages contains warnings, like Romans 11:20-21: "... Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either." Or Hebrews 2:1-3, which urges us to "pay more careful attention... to what we have heard" and ends with "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" Or 1 Corinthians 9:27, where Paul issues a warning to himself: "... so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

The reason for these passages is that we need warnings from God in order to persevere. Or, to put it in other language, they are one of the ways God has to ensure our perseverance. The proof of this is seen in the different ways unbelievers and believers react to them. Do the

problem verses I have cited as "warnings" trouble unbelievers? Not at all. Either they regard them as mere foolishness and something hardly to be noticed, or they take them in a straightforward manner but assume that their lives are all right and that the verses therefore do not concern them. It is only believers who are troubled, because they are concerned about their relationships with God and do not want to presume that all is well with their souls when it may not be.

These passages provoke us to higher levels of commitment and greater godliness, which is what they are given for. And even this should encourage us. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "To be concerned and troubled about the state of our soul when we read passages such as these is in and of itself evidence that we are sensitive to God's Word and to his Spirit, that we have spiritual life in us."

God's Plan and God's Glory

As I said at the beginning of this study, I have taken a great deal of time to discuss these
"problem passages" because I know that they loom large in the minds of Christian people whenever the doctrine of perseverance is discussed. And rightly so. We need to consider them carefully. But there is a danger in such close examination, for then we may give the impression that the related texts are all on the problem side and that there are very few passages that teach eternal security. That is not true, of course, even though in this study I will not balance my treatment of the problems with an equal number of passages on the positive side.

There are many such texts. I am sure you know some of them. There are two in the words of the Lord himself: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:2728).

"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day" (John 6:39).

There are also the confident words of Paul that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ"

(Phil. 1:6). And, of course, Romans 8:31-39, the end of the chapter:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

> "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Why will we persevere? We will persevere because this is God's plan for us, and the end of it all will be God's glory.

Chapter 115.
Five Unanswerable Questions

Romans 8:31-36

Anyone who has studied the Bible with care knows that there are times when we come to some soaring pinnacle of revelation and are left nearly breathless by the view. This is what happens when we come to the last great paragraph of Romans 8. Commentators have called these verses a "hymn of assurance," "a triumph song," "the highest plateau in the whole of divine revelation." But these accolades are surely all too

weak. This is a mountaintop paragraph. It is the Everest of the letter and thus the highest peak in the highest Himalayan range of Scripture.

I love the mountains, and some of my very best memories are linked to them. I remember a time some years ago, when my children were all young and our family was spending several weeks above Lake Geneva, near Montreux in Switzerland. There is a cable car there that takes people up a great massif called the Rocher de Nez, and on more than one occasion we went up the lift and spent many hours walking through the flower-filled meadows of the high Alpine slopes. Once on a perfect summer day we sat balanced on a ridge, looking off across the ranges and down into a valley where the cows were grazing, listening to the sonorous bells of the feeding herd and the chirping of the many birds—and reading *Heidi,* of course. One never forgets such experiences. I will never forget that day.

It is something like that to come to Romans 8:31-39. We have made our way up the steep ascent of doctrine in the first half of this great letter. We are able to look out over the beautiful but somewhat lower vistas of the book's second half. Yet now, for the time being, we are on the peak, and the experience is glorious.

John R. W. Stott has given me the title for this study, for in his short treatment of Romans 5-8, he speaks of "five undeniable affirmations" followed by "five unanswerable questions." We have already looked at the undeniable affirmations. They are five words: foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Now we are to look at the questions.

Strictly speaking, there are seven questions in these verses, two each in verses 31 and 35, and one each in verses 32, 33, and 34. But the first question is not really part of the set. It is a formula Paul has for moving from exposition to the conclusion of an argument; we have already seen it several times in the letter. It means, "In light of what I have been teaching, what conclusions follow?" And the last two questions (in verse 35) are actually part of the same inquiry. So there are five main questions in all. These five questions concern things that might be

imagined to be able to defeat God's plan for us or harm us. But each is unanswerable, because there is nothing that can have this effect.

John Stott says, "The apostle hurls these questions out into space, as it were, defiantly, triumphantly, challenging any creature in heaven or earth or hell to answer them or to deny the truth that is contained in them. But there is no answer, for nobody and nothing can harm the redeemed people of God."

These questions alone make this a mountaintop paragraph.

"Who Can Be Against Us?"

The first question is in verse 31: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Taken by itself, the second half of this question is not at all unanswerable. Who can be against us? Why, many people and many things, of course! And not only *can* they be against us, they are. Theology has spoken of three great enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world is against us because Christianity is an offense to it and is opposed to its God-rebelling ways. The world will get us to conform if it can; failing that, it will try to do us in. Our flesh is also an enemy because it contains the seeds of sin within it; we are unable to escape its baleful influence in this life. And, as if that were not enough, we have a powerful enemy in Satan, who is described by the apostle Peter as "a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Yes, there are plenty of enemies out there who are against us, and there is even an enemy within. But what are these when they are put into a sentence containing the verse's first half, "If God is for us..."?

That is it, you see. I am sure you recognize that the word *if* in this sentence does not imply any doubt, for Paul has just banished doubt in the passage before this. He has shown how God has set his love upon us, predetermining that we are to be conformed to the likeness of his own beloved Son. Then, having made the predetermination, he has

called, justified, and glorified us. In this verse "if means "since"—"since God is for us"—and that makes the difference.

It is as if Paul is challenging us to place all the possible enemies we can think of on one-half of an old-fashioned balance scale, as if we were weighing peanuts. Then, when we have all the peanuts assembled on the scale, he throws an anvil onto the other side of the balance. That side comes crashing down, and the peanuts are scattered. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Who can stand against God? The answer is "nobody." Nothing can defeat us if the Almighty God of the universe is on our side.

"How Will He Not Also...?"

"Ah," someone says, "but that is assuming that God himself does not change. Nothing can stand against God, true enough. But what if God should grow weary of us, forget about us, and move on to something else?" Paul deals with this speculation in verse 32, asking, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

Each of these five questions is unanswerable because each is grounded upon some undeniable truth, as we will see, and the undeniable truth in this verse is that God has given us his Son. If Paul had merely asked, "Will God give us all things?" we might hesitate to answer, for how could we be confident he will? He has given us much, to be sure. But all things? Wouldn't we be right to think that even God might have limits to his grace and generosity? That might be reasonable were it not for the fact that God has already given us his Son. Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, is the greatest thing God had to give. Yet he gave him—and not merely to be with us in some mystical way. He gave him over to death so that we might be rescued from the judgment due us for our sins.

Paul is challenging us to look at the cross and reason as follows: If God did that for us, sending his own Son, Jesus, to die in our place, is there anything he can possibly be imagined to withhold?

Some years ago a Bible teacher was speaking to a group of children, and he said that he would give a prize of ten dollars to anyone who could think of a promise that God might have made to us that he has not already made. The teacher might as well have offered a billion dollars, as he said, because our text tells us that God has already guaranteed us "all things" since he has not withheld his Son. The verse is a blank check for our true needs.

For example, we need strength to overcome temptation. By ourselves, we cannot resist temptations to sin. Will God give the strength we need to overcome it? Of course. Paul says elsewhere, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted above what you can bear..." (1 Cor. 10:13).

We also need a friend to be with us through life's dark places, so we will not despair and lose hope. Will God be a friend to us? Of course he will. Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends..." (John 15:15); "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Do we need direction for how we are to live and how we are to please God? God will provide that direction. God says, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go" (Ps. 32:8a).

Do we need comfort when we have lost a loved one? God is the only sure source of comfort.

Will God be with us in death's dark hour? Of course. He will sustain us in death and bring us joyfully into his glorious presence at the last. The Bible says, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15). And lest we somehow think that some important need of ours has been overlooked, we remember Paul's words to the Philippians, spoken under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

Clearly, if God gave us Jesus, the greatest of all possible gifts, he can be counted on to give us all the lesser gifts. As John Stott says, "The cross proves [God's] generosity."

"Who Will Bring Any Charge?"

The third of these questions moves into the legal area, as if we were now in a court of law, asking whether someone might exist somewhere to accuse us and thus bring us into final spiritual condemnation. The question is in verse 33, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" Who could do that, Paul queries, since "it is God who justifies"?

Do you remember that great scene in the writings of the minor prophet Zechariah in which the high priest of that day, whose name was Joshua, is seen standing in the temple, no doubt preparing to present the people's sacrifice, and Satan is also there accusing him? Joshua is dressed in filthy clothes, symbolizing his sin. The devil is arguing that Joshua is unfit for his office, because he is a sinner. But God is also there, and he rebukes Satan through an angel, who says: "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" (Zech. 3:2). Then we are told how Joshua's filthy clothes are removed and how he is clothed with rich garments and a clean turban, symbols of his justification through the work of Jesus Christ. Who could accuse him now? The answer is clear: "No one, no one at all." Because God has justified him.

This is the picture conjured up by Paul's question. Apart from the work of God in Christ there would be many to condemn us—the devil, of course, and others, even our own hearts. But consider Paul's counter: "It is God who justifies," indeed, *has* justified us (see v. 30). Who could possibly secure our condemnation when we have already been acquitted by the highest court of all?

"Who Is He That Condemns?"

The fourth question is so closely related to the third that some have considered them to be asking the same thing. Yet there is a difference, as I will now explain.

Paul had earlier asked whether the good purposes of God toward us could change, concluding that they could not, since God has already given us Jesus, the greatest of all gifts (v. 32). Now Paul seems to go a step further, asking whether the attitude of Jesus could change. Verse 34 asks the question: "Who is he that condemns?" It answers, "Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

The Bible teaches this truth in a striking image, using the word *paraclete* (or lawyer) for both the Holy Spirit and Jesus. A *paraclete* is "one called alongside another to help," which is also the exact meaning of the word *advocate*, the only difference being that one is derived from Greek and the other from Latin. Jesus used this word of the Holy Spirit when he told the disciples that he was going to send the Holy Spirit to them to be their Counselor (John 16:5-15), and John used the term to speak of Jesus himself, saying that in him we have an "advocate" (KJV) who "speaks to the Father in our defense" (1 John 2:1). This is a picture of a divine law firm with two branches, a heavenly office and an earthly one. On earth the Holy Spirit pleads for us, interpreting our petitions correctly. In heaven the Lord Jesus Christ pleads the efficacy of his shed blood to show that we are saved persons and that nothing can rise up to cause our condemnation by God.

"Who Shall Separate Us from... Christ?"

The final, all-embracing, and climactic question is in verse 35: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and the development of the answer carries us to the chapter's end.

John Stott writes:

With this fifth and last question, Paul himself does what we have been trying to do with his other four questions. He looks round for a possible answer. He brings forward all the adversaries he can think of, which

might be thought to separate us from Christ's love. We may have to endure "tribulation," "distress" and "persecution"—that is, the pressures of an ungodly world. We may have to undergo "famine" and "nakedness"—that is, the lack of adequate food and clothing, which, since Jesus promised them to the heavenly Father's children, might seem to be evidence that God does not care. We may even have to experience "peril" and "sword"—that is, the danger of death and actual death, by the malice of men; martyrdom, the ultimate test of our faith. It is a real test, too, because (v. 36) the Scripture warns us in Psalm 44:22 that God's people are for his sake "being killed all the day long." That is, they are continuously being exposed to the risk of death, like sheep for the slaughter.

These are adversities indeed. They are real sufferings, painful and perilous, and hard to bear. But can they separate us from the love of Christ? No! Verse 37: far from separating us from Christ's love, "in all these things"—in these very sufferings, in the experience and endurance of them— "we are more than conquerors."

What Do *You* Say?

These five questions are so important that we are going to return to them and study them in detail in the next few studies, much as we returned to the "five undeniable affirmations" in verses 29 and 30, after having looked at them more generally. But before we do that I want to return to the question I separated out at the beginning, namely, the introductory question: "What, then, shall we say in response to this?" (v. 31a).

Paul asks this summary question in a plural form, "What shall *we* say?", including everybody to whom he is writing. But I want to ask it in the singular. I want to ask it of you: "What do *you* say to these things? What is *your* response?"

This question is a divisive one, in the sense that it very clearly separates believers from unbelievers. Ask this question of a person who is not a Christian, and you will get one of two responses. One possibility is that

the person will be utterly indifferent to the question and to the doctrines of God's grace that lie behind it. That is, he couldn't care less about the answer, because he thinks the whole thing is utter foolishness. Or else the person will respond with hostility: "Who are you to think that God has shown such special favor to you? To actually send Jesus to die for you and then promise to keep you through all the problems of this life and take you to heaven? What amazing arrogance!" If you talk about the Christian faith to unbelievers, I am sure you have met with both these responses.

But what is the case with Christians? Their response is quite different. They rejoice in what God has done for them.

I admit that there are Christians who are confused about these teachings and some who are timid. They are afraid to be too strong when talking about God's keeping power with his saints, believing that an emphasis on perseverance is dangerous. "Won't it cause people to grow careless about their faith?" they wonder. It does not, of course. But even though some are confused and some are timid, I maintain that there is nevertheless an enormous gulf between Christians' responses and the responses of those who are yet in their sins.

The heart of the believer warms to these truths, cautiously perhaps, but nevertheless responding with joy. For within all who truly know Christ there is the conviction that his is indeed a great love; that his love for us is the very foundation of our salvation; and that, because his is a divine love, all Christians can be assured that his love for us will never be shaken, weaken, vary, fluctuate, or change. On the contrary, believers know that the love of God in Christ is the greatest reality in the universe. It is the strongest, most steady, firm, unbending, solid, substantial, constant, uniform, dependable thing of all.

So I ask, "What do you say in response to these affirmations?" Do they strike a harmonious note within you? If so, it is proof that God has been at work in your life, bringing you out of darkness into his marvelous light. If these doctrines do not seem appealing to you—if they do not seem true or if you regard them with indifference—I warn you that you

are not a Christian, that you do not know the Lord Jesus Christ in a saving way. I present him to you as your Savior. I challenge you to repent of your sin and turn to him.

It is this very gospel, the Good News of the fixed love of God in Jesus Christ, that is commended to you. As Paul wrote earlier in the letter, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

God used this great doctrine of the keeping power of the love of God in Christ to save Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the most powerful evangelists who ever lived. He became a Christian when he was only fifteen years of age. But he had already noticed that friends of his, who had begun life well, had made a wreck of their lives by falling into gross vices. Spurgeon feared that he might fall into them, too. In later years he explained his thinking: "Whatever good resolutions I might make, the probabilities were they would be good for nothing when temptation assailed me. I might be like those of whom it has been said, 'They see the devil's hook and yet cannot help nibbling at his bait.'" Spurgeon feared that he would disgrace himself and be lost.

It was then that he heard that Jesus will keep his saints from falling and will bring them safely to heaven. The doctrine had a particular charm for him, and he found himself saying, "If I go to Jesus and get from him a new heart and a right spirit, I shall be secured against these temptations into which others have fallen. I shall be preserved by him." It was this truth, with others, that brought C. H. Spurgeon to the Savior.

"What do you say to these things?" This is a divisive question, as I said. But it is a decisive one too, and I urge you to decide. May God give you grace to respond to the message in faith and with joy.

Chapter 116.
Enduring Love

Romans 8:32

John Calvin always expressed himself beautifully and frequently with great power. He has done both in his comments on Romans 8:31:

"'If God is for us, who is against us?' "This is the chief and therefore the only support to sustain us in every temptation. If God is not propitious to us, no sure confidence can be conceived, even though everything should smile upon us. On the other hand, however, his favor alone is a sufficiently great consolation for every sorrow, and a sufficiently strong protection against all the storms of misfortune."

The great Reformer then cites a number of Bible texts in which believers dare to despise every earthly danger because of trusting God alone.

Psalm 23:4. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

Psalm 56:11. "In God I will trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Psalm 3:6. "I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side." Calvin then concludes, "There is no power under heaven or above it which can resist the arm of God."

That is all very true, and it is what the apostle Paul wants us to conclude as the result of Romans
8:31, the first verse of the great defiant paragraph that concludes the eighth chapter. But a new question arises in our minds: Granted that nothing can be against us if God is for us, but *is* God really for us? How can we know that the great God of the universe is actually on our side?

Perhaps he is too busy to care about us.

Maybe we are too insignificant for him to give us even a second thought.

What if our sins have caused him to regret that he brought us into being in the first place?

Paul has no doubts along any of these lines, of course. But lest *we* do, he follows his first question with a second one, which is meant to blow these fearful musings to the winds: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (v. 32). The verse means: We can know that God is for us and will be for us always because he has already given us his Son.

Facts Not Emotions

I want to examine Paul's statement in some detail because, like each of these great questions and statements, it is vitally important. But before I do, it is also important to notice what Paul does not say. If Paul were one of our contemporary Bible teachers or modern theologians, he might answer our doubts by saying, "You do not need to worry about the future, because God loves you. God is love."

That would be true, of course. In fact, that is the ultimate affirmation of this paragraph: Nothing in heaven or earth or "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39). But Paul was a pastor, and he knew well that we can all easily doubt such statements, particularly when life becomes difficult. "All right," we may say, "I grant that God is love. But does he love *me?* How can I believe he loves me when I have lost my job, when my husband [or wife] has left me for someone else, when I have been diagnosed with an incurable disease? In fact, even when things go well, there are times when I just do not feel that God loves me or even that he cares about me at all."

Paul knew that mere assurances that God loves us are not effective. So, instead of dealing with our doubts on the emotional level—which is what "God loves you" does—he turns from emotional experience to sure facts. According to this verse, we can know that God is for us, not because we somehow sense that it is his nature to be loving, but because he has given us his Son to die for us. That is, we can know God's nature because of what he has already done in human history.

Actually, that is what Paul also does in verse 39, which I said was the ultimate affirmation of this paragraph. He says that nothing in heaven or earth or "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." But notice that even there, where he is speaking explicitly of God's love, it is nevertheless the love of God that is "in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is a way of saying that it is only in Christ and through the work of Christ that we can know and be assured of God's love.

Someone has noted rightly that there is hardly a verse in the Bible that speaks of God's love that does not also, either explicitly or by inference, speak of the cross of Christ or the atonement.

What Hath God Wrought?

The cross of Christ is so important to Paul that he will present various aspects of it in this and the next two verses. Yet Paul's purpose here is not to develop a theory of the atonement; he has done that already in Romans 3. His immediate purpose is to remind us of the factual elements of the atonement so that we will know that God is truly on our side.

What facts does he tell us in this verse?

1. *That this is God's action; God has done it.* This is the kind of point that is easy to pass over and not even think about. But it is actually extremely important, and a failure to see it leads to errors. I will present two of them.

The first error is made by people who think of the atonement as something accomplished by a loving Jesus to change the mind of God, who is imagined to be angry. To this way of thinking, God is ready to condemn us, but Jesus enters the picture to plead for us. "I love these people," he says. "Look, I am dying for them, in their place. Spare them for my sake." So God, who initially is reluctant or hostile, eventually agrees. "All right," he says. "I'll do it since you seem to care so much."

That is a travesty of what happened, of course. For whenever we read the Bible we find from beginning to end that the salvation of sinners by the death of Jesus is God's idea, that he, to use theological language, is the author or source of our salvation. Think of Isaiah 53:4:

> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
> yet we considered him *stricken by God,* smitten *by him,* and afflicted.

The point of the verse, as emphasized by the added italics, is that God was responsible for Jesus's death. Isaiah makes the same point two verses further on, in verse 6.

> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
> and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6 is one of the clearest statements of substitutionary atonement in the Bible, but it is no less a statement of the fact that God the Father conceived and carried out this plan. God was not made to love us by Christ's death. He loved us from the beginning, and it is because he loved us that Jesus died. We can easily see how important this truth is to the argument for eternal security that Paul is making.

The second error people make in thinking of Christ's death is that they see it as a result of human actions only. "What a terrible day that was, when evil, jealous men killed the best man who ever lived," they might say.

It is true that evil men conspired to do away with Jesus. But the Bible never stops there when it speaks of the atonement. Do you remember how Peter put it when he addressed the Jews of Jerusalem on Pentecost, a few bare weeks after the crucifixion? He asserted their guilt. There was no escaping that. But he said this, "This man was handed over to you *by God's set purpose and foreknowledge;* and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23, emphasis added). They were guilty, but the important thing is that Jesus' death had been planned and was accomplished by God.

So the atonement shows that God loved us from the beginning, indeed, has always loved us. It shows that he is truly on our side.

2. *That the atonement involved God's only Son.* The second point of fact Paul makes in verse 32 is that the atonement involved God's one and only Son. This teaches a number of things, one of them being Jesus' full deity. Indeed, this is basic to what comes next. For it is his being divine that gives the death of Jesus its full force and meaning. If Jesus were only another human being, his death would have no more value or significance than that of any other human being, a great example perhaps, but certainly not an atonement. It is because Jesus is the unique Son of God and therefore both holy and of infinite value that his death can be a true atonement for our sin.

John the Baptist introduced Jesus by saying, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). This is important, too, because it adds something to the first statement. Showing that God is the author of our salvation points out that God has always been disposed to love us; indeed, he has loved us from eternity. But if that is all that can be said, a question would immediately arise: But how *much* does he love us? We, too, often love, though not well. Our love weakens. Could it be that God is like us in love, that he loves but not a whole lot—not enough to actually see us through all life's difficulties?

The answer, of course, is that God loves with an intensity and affection infinitely surpassing ours. And we know this because he has given us his own Son, his one and only Son. Jesus is the greatest gift God had to give. There is nothing in all the universe more precious to God than his Son and nothing greater than God's Son. So when God gave Jesus, he proved the greatness of his love by the most precious gift of all.

> The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave his Son to win.
> His erring child he reconciled and rescued from his sin.
> O love of God, how rich and pure, how measureless and strong.
> It shall forevermore endure, the saints' and angels' song.
>
> F. M. Lehman, 1917

3. *That God spared him not.* The third assertion in this verse carries us a step beyond even what we have seen so far, for it tells us that God "did not spare" Jesus. He could have spared him, but he did not.

Almost everyone who writes on this verse carefully recognizes that it contains a strong reference to the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. This is because the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament uses the Greek word for "spared" that is found in Romans 8:32 to translate one of God's words to Abraham following the patriarch's amazing obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son. The New International Version translates it as "withheld" in the Genesis text, but it is the same word. God said, "... because you have done this and have not withheld [spared] your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore..." (Gen. 22:16-17).

The irony of the story, however, is that although Abraham was obedient to God up to the point of actually raising the knife to kill his son—that is, *he did not spare him*—God intervened to accomplish just that. God *did* spare Isaac, though Abraham was willing not to do so.

But the story also illustrates, and undoubtedly was also used by God to teach Abraham, that one day God literally would not spare his own Son but would allow him to die in order that Isaac and Abraham and all other believers down through the long ages of human history might be spared. Jesus is the only one who has ever deserved to be spared. Certainly none of *us* do. But by refusing to spare his Son, God spared us so that we might be saved and come to spend an eternity in glory with him. Somehow God taught that to Abraham on Mount Moriah, which is why Abraham named the place *Jehovah Jireh,* "The Lord Will Provide" (Gen. 22:14). God provided for us by giving up Jesus.

4. *That God delivered up Jesus for us.* This brings us to the fourth of the statements Paul has tucked into this single verse about the actions of God the Father in saving us through Jesus' death on

> Calvary. The previous statement was negative: "He did not spare his own Son." This statement is positive: "but gave him up for us all." It is a way of making the point more emphatic.

What does the statement mean when it says that God "gave him up" for us all? It means that God delivered him to death, of course. Jesus died, whereas Isaac did not have to die on Mount Moriah. But it is not just physical death that is meant here. This death was a spiritual death, involving a temporary separation from the Father when Jesus was made sin for us and actually bore the wrath of God against sin in our place. Do you remember the agony of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane? Jesus prayed that "this cup" might be taken from him and in his grief sweat, as it were, great drops of blood (Luke 22:39-44). Later on the cross he prayed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). This was not a man shrinking from mere physical death. If it were, Socrates would be a better model for us than Jesus. Instead, it was the horror of the holy, eternal Son of God as he faced the experience of being made sin for us and of bearing the wrath of separation from the love of God in our place. He was delivered up so that we might be spared. He bore the wrath of God so that we might never have to bear it. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

Such, then, is the measure of God's love, and it is the only adequate measure of a love which is "beyond measure." How pathetic and hopeless is the position of people who think that they safeguard the love of God by denying the substitutionary theory of the atonement, who say that our Lord did not cry out in an agony, and who imagine that the measure of the love of God is that God says, "Though you have killed my Son, I still love you, and am still ready to forgive you"! They believe that they safeguard and magnify the love of God by denying the truth concerning the wrath of God, and that God must and does punish sin.... What they actually do is detract from the love of God. The love of God is only truly seen when we realize that "He spared not his own Son"....

It is in such an action that you see the love of God. He loved such as we are, and to such an extent, that for us he punished his only Son, did not

spare him anything, "delivered him up for us all," and poured upon him the final dregs of his wrath against sin and evil, and the guilt involved in it all.

From the Greater to the Lesser

At this point it is easy to see how Paul's argument wraps up. For, having reminded us of the greater truth, indeed the greatest truth of all, the apostle insists that the lesser will certainly follow from it. It is like saying, "If a rich benefactor has given you a million dollars, he will certainly not withhold a quarter if you need it for a parking meter."

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" What are these "all things" Paul mentions? Well, *all things,* of course! Still, we have to understand this in the context of the terms Paul has been using. It does not mean all material things, as if Paul were promising that we would be rich. Or even good health necessarily. It is rather along the line of verse 28, which says that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." It means that God will overrule everything for our benefit, so that even evil will somehow be worked into God's great purpose, which is to make us like Jesus.

Whatever your circumstances, whatever trials, whatever pains, whatever persecutions, whatever hardships—God will use all of these things to make you like Jesus. Beyond that, he will provide all true necessities for your growth in holiness and perseverance in faith until the very end.

Love That Will Not Let Go

I want to end with a great hymn written by a Scottish minister of the last century whose name was George Matheson. He lived from 1842 to 1906. Matheson was blind, having lost his sight in his early youth, and his blindness gives great power and pathos to the words of the hymn, which clearly refer to it. But the occasion for the hymn was not the blindness but, in his own words, some "extreme mental distress," which

had brought him great "pain." The story that grew up around this hymn, that his fiancee left Matheson when he lost his sight, seems to be unfounded. Nevertheless, something happened, something so painful that he never related it to anyone.

Matheson wrote this hymn on the evening of June 6, 1882, when he was alone in the manse in Inellen, Scotland, his family having all gone to Glasgow for his sister's wedding.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.
O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.
O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

No one can read those lines without knowing that George Matheson knew the love of God in Christ Jesus and was assured that, whatever his circumstances might be, "he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" would surely "along with him, graciously give us all things."

Christian, reason it out. Do not be double-minded in your spiritual understanding. Know that God is working out all things for your good and that he will surely keep on doing so until the end.

Chapter 117.
Our Perfect Salvation

Romans 8:33

We have been dealing with the last full paragraph of Romans 8, and the focus of our discussion is the five unanswerable questions it contains. We have looked at two of these already: (1) "If God is for us, who can be against us?" and (2) "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" In this study we come to the third unanswerable question.

The question asks: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" It is unanswerable because "it is God who justifies."

When I was writing about these five questions earlier, I pointed out that each is unanswerable because of some great spiritual truth. The truth behind the first great question is that God is for us. Therefore, "Who can be against us?" The truth in the second question is that God has already given us the best gift he could possibly have given. Therefore, "How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

What is the truth in this third question? It is that God has justified us. No charge can be brought against those whom God has chosen if God, the supreme Judge of the entire universe, has acquitted them.

Let me state this another way. In the first question we are reminded that in God we have a Champion. In the second question we are reminded that in God we have a Benefactor. In the third question we are reminded that in God we have a Judge.

The Judge Appears

Ah, but that is just the problem. A judge? The very word triggers feelings of anxiety within us, and when we think of God as the Supreme Judge and of the fact that we must stand before him one day, our souls are rightly troubled and distressed. This thought filled the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther with fearful contemplation, which he captured in one of his greatest hymns:

> Great God, what do I see and hear!
> The end of things created!
> The Judge of mankind doth appear
> On clouds of glory seated!
> The trumpet sounds, the graves restore
> The dead which they contained before:
> Prepare my soul to meet him.

In our day a great deal of cultural energy has been spent trying to dispel these anxieties, lest we think about the final judgment and become troubled by the prospect. We numb ourselves by banal and unending entertainment, crowd our hours with frantic activity, bolster our sagging selfimages by pop psychology and self-help programs. But in our quiet moments, if we have any, our subconscious thoughts surface to remind us that we are not what we should be, that we have willed to go astray like lost and foolish sheep, and that one day there will certainly be an accounting.

This disturbing realization is captured in a popular song by Billy Joel that says quite rightly, "I know that it'll catch up to me, somewhere along the line." We are troubled on three counts.

First, our consciences accuse us. We put on a front for other people and sometimes fool them.

We get them thinking that we are better or nicer or smarter or more godly than we actually are. But we do not do very well fooling ourselves. We know what our thoughts are in our secret moments—the lusts, angers, lies, and blasphemous ideas we harbor within. We may dull those thoughts, but we cannot escape them. This is what Paul was

talking about in Romans 2:12-16, where he spoke of the final judgment day and of how even the thoughts of the heathen accuse them:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

As if it were not bad enough that our consciences accuse us, we also have Satan as our great "accuser." The Bible tells us this, in case we were not aware of it, for there he is called "the accuser of our brothers [that is, Christians], who accuses them before our God day and night" (Rev. 12:10). It is Christians whom Satan particularly accuses, for he already dominates unbelievers and does not want to awaken them to their sin.

If you are a Christian, Satan is accusing you to God. He is saying, "Did you see what John Smith did? That is no way for a Christian to act. That act is disgraceful, ungodly, secular. How can a person do that and still claim to be a Christian? How can you regard him as a Christian?"

Satan is saying, "Do you know what Mary Smith is thinking about right now? Her thoughts are unworthy of even a highly immoral woman, let alone a Christian. Aren't you ashamed of her conduct? I know I am."

Satan is saying, "I wouldn't have those people as my followers. How can you accept them? How can you have sent your Son to die for them?"

And Satan is making such accusations "day and night," according to the text in Revelation.

Yet it is not our own consciences or even Satan that really troubles us if we are at all spiritually perceptive. Rather, it is that we must stand before God, the Omniscient One, before whom all hearts are open, all desires known. That is the truly troubling prospect. That is what distressed Luther in the days before he came to understand the gospel and rejoice in what God had done for him in Jesus Christ. He used to tremble, asking himself, "How can I stand before God in the day of his judgment?" The wisdom of his age said that he could stand before God by good works. "But," said Luther, "what works can come from a heart like mine? How can I stand before the holiness of my Judge with works polluted in their very source?"

Have you never thought this way? Have you never trembled at the thought that one day you must stand before God? In our day, of course, it is quite possible that such a thought has not crossed your mind. Much of our culture is designed to keep you from contemplating that awesome happening.

If you have never thought this way, if you have never trembled for your soul in light of your sins, then I say, "God help you." How can you believe in the gospel if you have never trembled under law? How can you be comforted by a text like Romans 8:33 if you have never seen your need to be saved from sin by Jesus Christ, to be justified by God on the basis of Christ's atonement and the gift of his righteousness?

It Is God Who Justifies

I am not unfolding the meaning of this great text in Romans to bring you discomfort, of course. I do this only to awaken you to what the text says. The important thing is not merely that God, the author and accomplisher of our salvation, is our Judge. It is that this great, sovereign, and inescapable Judge has acquitted us through the work of Jesus Christ—if we have believed on Jesus Christ and trust him.

I want you to see two great things Romans 8:33 teaches us.

If you have been saved by God through the work of Jesus Christ, you are among those "whom

God has chosen."

That is an interesting way of putting the statement, isn't it? Paul does not say, "Who will bring any charge against sinners?" For there are sinners whose sins are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, and there are sinners whose sins are *not* covered by the blood of Christ. In the case of the latter, not only are the charges made—by their own consciences, by Satan, and by God himself— those charges stick! Those sinners are guilty, and there is no escape from the inevitable and resulting condemnation. It is only those "whom God has chosen" who will escape such sharp condemnation.

The word *chosen* takes us back to verses 28-30, which give the context in which the new status of "those whom God has chosen" is to be understood. Who are these persons? They are those "who have been called according to his [that is, God's] purpose" (v. 28). They are those whom "God foreknew" and "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (v. 29).

Using the five great words of that passage, they are those whom God "foreknew," "predestined," "called," "justified," and "glorified." What Paul is saying in our text is: How could anyone possibly bring any lasting or prevailing charge against such persons?

If you are among those whom God has chosen, it is also true that God has justified you of all sin.

It is God himself who has justified you! A few paragraphs back, I wrote that the greatest fear we have, if we think through our spiritual state carefully, is not that our consciences and/or Satan accuse us, but that the God who knows everything is our Judge. It terrifies us to consider that while we may harden our hearts or deaden our consciences and perhaps even fool Satan, we cannot avoid or fool God. It is God with whom we have to deal. Ah, but that very fact is our comfort. For if, instead of being condemned by God we are actually acquitted or justified by him,

then who is left to condemn us? If we have been saved by God, who can possibly overturn God's judgment?

Do you see how this works? If we have actually been justified by God, the fact that causes us most to tremble is actually that which gives us most assurance and comfort.

Let me spell this out in a few particulars:

1. *Our greatest offense is against God, however great our offenses against other persons may be.* So, if God has forgiven us, we are justified indeed. David sinned against Bathsheba, with whom he committed adultery, and against her husband Uriah, whom he arranged to have killed. But in his great psalm of repentance he rightly declared to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4a). As a consequence, he knew that if God cleansed him from his sin, he would have complete restoration. That is why he says in that same psalm, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (v. 7). God did cleanse him, and he was washed from his iniquity. David was justified because of Christ's righteousness.

2. *God knows the law perfectly.* This second important aspect of our being justified by God is rooted in the fact that the law is God's law, after all, and God, who knows that law, has justified us. Therefore, we need not fear that some smart lawyer, like Satan (Rev. 12:10), will somehow find something we have done that has not been covered by the blood of Christ or some technicality that would make it impossible for God to justify us.

God is omniscient. He knows every stipulation of the law. He knows us in every particular. He knows our outward sins and our inward sins. He knows the sins of our heart as well as the sins of our minds. He knows the sins we would have done had we been given the chance to do them, and he knows the sins we sought out opportunities to commit. He knows our sins against others and our sins against ourselves. Nothing is

outside the scope of God's knowledge. Nevertheless, knowing all this, God has justified us. And the reason he has justified us is that he also knows every detail of Christ's work and is fully aware of its value. He is aware—because he has so ordained—that "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

3. *God has satisfied all possible claims against us; he has done this himself, through Jesus Christ.* We have seen this before, but it is worth reminding ourselves that there is both a negative and a positive side to justification. The negative side has to do with the atonement: Christ's bearing the punishment of our sin in our place. It is what the New English Bible emphasizes in its translation of Romans 8:33: "It is God who pronounces acquittal." We are pardoned because of Christ's work—that is, not condemned. But justification is much more than this, which is why the New English Bible translation does not go far enough and why the New International Version is better. "Acquittal" has only a negative connotation. It is true, but justification also involves the positive side of the transaction. If we are "justified," we are clothed with the very righteousness of Christ.

Elsewhere I have described justification as having these two parts: (1) our sin has been placed upon Jesus Christ and has been punished there, and (2) his righteousness has been placed on us. Or, as I have also said, it has been credited to our account.

Here is the way D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it: "To justify means more than to pardon; it means more than to forgive. As we have seen repeatedly in our study of the first four chapters of this Epistle, it means that God makes a declaration, a judicial declaration, to the effect that he has not only forgiven us, but that he now regards us as just and righteous and holy, as if we had never sinned at all.... God not only imputes my sin to his Son, he takes his righteousness and imputes it to me."

In the words of that great hymn, "Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness":

Bold shall I stand in that great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully through thee absolved I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

"No one can lay any charge against me," writes Lloyd-Jones, "because I am arrayed in this righteousness."

4. *The jurisdiction of God's court is universal.* Therefore, being acquitted by that court, we can never be condemned by any other. This aspect of our justification assures us and gives us comfort, even when our own thoughts and consciences accuse us.

We are aware of how lawyers will appeal to a higher court if they fail to get the verdict they are after in the lower court. In fact, they do it routinely. Even in a jury trial, a verdict can be appealed if there was an error in presenting evidence or if the judge erred in his instructions to the jury. Suppose, under rare circumstances, your case was appealed even to the Supreme Court of the United States and you were acquitted.

Even then there are situations in which you could conceivably still be in jeopardy. Suppose that jurisdiction in your case was challenged by another country. It might be possible for you to be acquitted here but then for you somehow to fall into the hands of people from that other country and be tried by them and found guilty.

On earth our status can be terribly uncertain. But not if we are judged and justified by God. The court of God is the Supreme Court of all Supreme Courts. His bench is the highest of all tribunals. There is no national government that can challenge God's judgment. Therefore, when Paul says, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies," he is asserting with great strength that those who are in Christ need fear no condemnation—not now, not ever. No one can overthrow the blessed judgment that has been rendered by God in our favor.

Prepared to Meet Him

All this is what Martin Luther discovered, of course, and it is why he became the prophet of the Reformation. In his early days, before he had studied the Bible and had learned that God has made the righteousness of Jesus Christ available for those who trust him, Luther feared for his soul. Earlier I referred to his great hymn on the judgment. It contains a verse about sinners who have not trusted Christ:

> ... sinners, filled with guilty fears,
> Behold his wrath prevailing;
> For they shall rise and find their tears
> And sighs are unavailing:
> The day of grace is past and gone;
> Trembling they stand before the throne,
> All unprepared to meet him.

That was once Martin Luther's fear. But then Luther discovered that God had made the necessary preparation through the death of Jesus Christ. He understood that justification can never be on the basis of our works, for it is our works that have gotten us into trouble in the first place. Rather, justification is provided on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus died for sinners, and the righteousness in which believers are enabled to stand in the day of God's judgment is his righteousness that is imputed to them—and to us, if we are Christians.

That is the ground of our confidence. That is our security: the work of Jesus Christ and that alone. The last verse of Luther's hymn, picking up the theme of verse one, therefore cries,

> Great God, what do I see and hear!
> The end of things created!
> The judge of mankind doth appear,
> On clouds of glory seated!
> Beneath his cross I view the day
> When heaven and earth shall pass away
> And thus prepare to meet him.

I have no desire to frighten you with thoughts of the final judgment. I want you to find comfort in Christ. But I need to say one more thing. If

you are not in Christ—if your sins are not covered by his blood and you are not clothed in his righteousness—you *should* be frightened! There is no comfort for you. One day you will have to meet God, whom you have dishonored, and be judged by Christ, whom you have spurned. Who will save you in that day, if God himself is not your Savior? If you are not in Christ, in that day you will find God to be a stern, unyielding Judge.

But this is not yet that day. This is the day of God's grace. Jesus Christ is still proclaimed as Savior. Believe on him. Trust him. If you do, you will enter into a salvation that neither earth nor hell can shake and that God himself has made secure.

Chapter 118.
Our Wonderful Mediator

Romans 8:34

Up to this point our study of the last part of Romans 8 has taught the doctrine of eternal security by presenting what God the Father has done on our behalf. This was particularly clear in verses 28-30, where it was a case of *God's* working, *God's* choosing, *God's* predestining, *God's* calling,
God's justifying and *God's* glorifying. It was also the case in the following three verses in which
Paul began to ask his unanswerable questions: (1) "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (2) "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" and (3) "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?"

Even when the death of Jesus was mentioned, as it is in question two, it was mentioned from the viewpoint of God's giving up his Son.

With the fourth of these five questions, Paul's approach changes, as the work of Jesus Christ himself is suddenly brought forward. "Who is he

that condemns?" Paul asks. Again there is no answer, because "Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

In other words, having just said that God justified his people, Paul now speaks of the ground of that justification and offers four reasons why those who have been justified can be assured that they are forever free from condemnation. These reasons, all of which have to do with Jesus Christ's work, both past and present, are: (1) Christ's death, (2) Christ's resurrection, (3) Christ enthronement at the right hand of God, and (4) Christ's continuing intercession for us.

Christ's Death for Sin

As soon as we reflect on the teaching in this verse we are immediately impressed with how much doctrine Paul has compressed into it. He has done this with an economy of words, and nowhere is this more evident than in the first of his four statements. "Christ Jesus, who died" is all he says.

Why did he not elaborate on this a little bit?

The answer surely is that he has already done so in the earlier parts of the letter. In those earlier chapters we learn that Jesus died for sin, making an atonement for it. By means of his atonement he propitiated or turned aside the wrath of God, which sin deserved. Moreover, since Jesus had no sin of his own for which to atone, we learn that he did this on our behalf, or vicariously. Some years ago the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked what was the most important word in the Bible, the questioner no doubt thinking that Barth would say "love" or some such godly quality. But instead Barth answered, "*Hyper*." In Greek, *Hyper* is a preposition, meaning "on behalf of or "in place of another. Barth called this the most important word because it signifies that the death of Jesus was in our place and for us. He died so that we might not have to die spiritually.

I suppose the most common response to this, particularly from a Christian congregation, is that we already know all about it. Indeed, we

have known it for a long time. Why do we have to keep saying it again and again? Why repeatedly bring up the death of Jesus Christ?

Well, if you really do know this and really do live by faith in Christ and his atonement, there probably is no need to keep on repeating it, although those who know it best generally are those who love hearing it most often. Katherine Hankey's hymn says rightly, "I love to tell the story, for those who know it best/Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest."

But I suggest that we do need to hear it (and often), for the very reason Paul is repeating himself in Romans. Remember, he is writing about assurance. And the reason he is writing about assurance and at such length is that we tend to waver on this subject and doubt our salvation. This is particularly true when we fall into sin, whether outright sins of commission or those more subtle sins of the mind or spirit, perhaps even the sin of doubting God's word about salvation. In such a frame of mind we find ourselves wondering whether we really are saved or are still saved, assuming that we were saved once but have perhaps fallen away.

If you find yourself thinking like this, you need to hear that "old, old story" again. You need to hear what Jesus did for your sin, bearing the punishment of God upon it in your place.

"But suppose I sin?" you ask. Don't say "suppose." You have sinned and will continue to sin. That is not the right question. The question is rather, "Did Jesus die for my sin or did he not?" If he did, then the punishment for that sin has been undertaken by Jesus in your place, and there is no one (not even God) who can condemn you for it. Jesus took your condemnation.

"But suppose I question this?"

This questioning of yours—is it a sin or isn't it? If it is not a sin, if it is only a mere intellectual puzzling over the full meaning of what Jesus Christ has done and why, there is no problem. Christians are free to ask God questions and state what they do not understand. If it *is* a sin, that

is, if it is outright disbelief of God's Word, even then why should this sin more than any other separate you from God's love and condemn you —if Jesus has, in fact, died for it?

I do not mean by this that your sin is covered by Christ's blood if you are among those who reject his atonement and scorn it. That is an unbelief that has never known faith. If you do this, you are not regenerate. I am speaking to those who are born again and love Jesus but who have doubts concerning their salvation. To them I say, as Paul does, "Christ died." He died for you.

When he hung on the cross, Jesus said of his atoning work, "It is finished" (John 19:30). And it was! It was finished forever. There is nothing that can ever be added to it or be taken away.

Christ's Resurrection

The second reason why we can be assured of our salvation on the basis of Jesus work for us is his resurrection, which Paul introduces with the words "more than that, who was raised to life."

That is a strange way of introducing the doctrine of the resurrection, because it is linked to Christ's death as if it adds something to it. And how can that be, if the atonement is a finished work, as I just said? Once again, this is something Paul explained earlier in Romans when he was dealing with the work of Jesus more extensively. Think back to what the aposde said at the end of chapter four, as he brought the first great section of the book to a close and prepared to move on into the second great section, which we are now studying: "He [Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).

What does that mean, "raised to life for our justification"? As the Bible describes them, both the resurrection and justification are works of God. So the verse is saying that God raised Jesus from the dead in some way that relates to his work of justification. Since justification is based on *Christ's* propitiation, the connection between resurrection and

justification is not one of cause and effect. Rather, it must be one of demonstration. The point of the resurrection is to verify the justification, which is based upon the death. It is God's way of showing that Jesus' death was a true atonement and that all who believe on him are indeed justified from all sin.

Let me put it this way. When Jesus was alive on earth he said that he was going to die for sin, becoming a ransom for many. In time he did die and was placed in a tomb where he lay for three days.

Had he died for sin? He said that was what he was going to do, but the words alone do not prove his death was an atonement. Suppose Jesus was deluded? What if he only thought he was the Son of God and the Savior? Or again, suppose he was not sinless? He claimed to have been sinless.

He seemed to be. But suppose he had sinned, even a little bit? In that case, he would have been a sinner himself, and his death could not have atoned even for his own sin, let alone for the sin of others. The matter would remain in doubt.

But then the morning of the resurrection comes. The body of Jesus is raised, and the stone is rolled back from the opening of the tomb so the women and later others can see and verify that he has indeed been raised. Now there is no doubt, for it is inconceivable that God the Father should thus verify the claims of Jesus if he was not his unique Son and was not therefore a true and effective Savior of his people.

As the great Bible teacher Reuben A. Torrey said in one of his writings, "I look at the cross of Christ, and I know that atonement has been made for my sins; I look at the open sepulcher and the risen and ascended Lord, and I know that the atonement has been accepted. There no longer remains a single sin on me, no matter how many or how great my sins may have been. My sins may have been as high as the mountains, but in the light of the resurrection the atonement that covers them is as high as heaven. My sins may have been as deep as the ocean, but in the light of

the resurrection the atonement that swallows them up is as deep as eternity."

"Who is he that condemns?"—who could possibly condemn us if Jesus has died for us and has been raised as proof of our justification?

Christ's Enthronement at God's Right Hand

We are climbing a grand staircase in studying these four phrases that speak of the saving work of Christ, both past and present. But we are likely to miss a step at this point if we are not very careful, because the third step deals with the ascension and enthronement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and this is not something heard a great deal about in most churches. (In the more liturgical churches there is a special day known as Ascension Day on which the doctrines associated with Jesus' return to heaven are often noted.)

There are two chief teachings involved. The first is Jesus' *glorification.* This was God's answer to the prayer Jesus uttered just before his arrest and crucifixion, recorded in John 17. He said, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:4-5). Jesus laid this glory aside in order to become man to accomplish the work of redemption. But now, contemplating the end of his work, he asks for that glory to be restored.

And it has been! According to Acts, at the moment of his martyrdom Stephen saw the glorified
Jesus "standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56), and Paul was stopped and redirected by Jesus' voice while on the way to Damascus to persecute the early Christians (Acts 9:3-5). The apostle John later had similar visions of Jesus, according to the Book of Revelation.

The other teaching associated with Ascension Day is the one Paul seems chiefly to be concerned with here. It is Christ's "session," his being seated at God's right hand. Since the "right hand" was considered the place of honor, for Jesus to be seated there involves his exultation.

That alone is significant in regard to our eternal security, for it means that the One who has achieved it for us by his death has been honored for precisely that achievement.

But there is more to the doctrine than even this. The most important thing about Jesus' being seated is that sitting implies a finished work. As long as a person is standing, there is still work to do. But once it is finished, the person rests from that work, as God rested from his "work of creating" (Gen. 2:2).

This point is developed carefully in the letter to the Hebrews, where a comparison is made between the work of Israel's earthly priests, according to the pattern of temple worship that had been given by God, and the work of Jesus, who was the high priest to come. This theme dominates Hebrews, beginning as early as chapter 4 and continuing as far as chapter 10. The point is that Jesus' priestly work is superior to and replaces the preparatory work done by earthly priests.

Then comes this important statement in chapter 10: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Jesus Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, *he sat down at the right hand of God.* Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb. 10:11-14, emphasis added). The Jewish temple had no chairs in it, though there were other articles of furniture. This signified that the work of the priests was never done. Indeed, even the great sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement had to be repeated year by year. But when Christ offered himself as a sacrifice, that sacrifice was the perfect fulfillment of the prior types and a true and utterly sufficient atonement for sin. It did not have to be repeated. Therefore, when Jesus had offered this sacrifice and it was accepted by God the Father, he showed that the work was completed by sitting down at God's right hand.

Where is Jesus now? He is seated at God's right hand. So whenever you doubt your salvation and are becoming disturbed by such thoughts, look

to Jesus at the right hand of the Father, realize that he is there because his work of sacrifice is completed, that nothing can ever add to it or take away from it, and that you are therefore completely secure in him.

What would have to happen for you to lose your salvation, once you have been foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified by God? For that to happen, God would have to throw the entire plan of salvation into reverse. Jesus would have to rise from his throne, go backward through the ascension (now a descension), enter the tomb again, be placed upon the cross, and then come down from it. For you to perish, the atonement would have had never to have happened. Only then could you be lost. But it *has* happened, according to the plan of God. And the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead, brought to heaven, and been seated on the right hand of God the Father is proof that it has been accomplished. Your security is now as certain as the Lord's enthronement, which means that it is as unshakable as Jesus himself.

Christ's Present Intercession

The final reason why the believer in Christ can be assured of his salvation based on the work of Christ is Jesus' present intercession. Paul says that Jesus "is also interceding for us."

In light of the ideas of accusation, judgment, and acquittal that have appeared throughout this section, it is natural to see this intercession as Jesus' pleading the benefits of his death on our behalf in the face of Satan or any other individual's accusations. Bible teachers have often spoken of the verse that way, and I have done so myself on occasion. But this is probably not quite the right idea. Why? Because Paul has introduced the verse with the question "Who is he that condemns?" and the answer to that is "no one," as long as Jesus has died, been raised, and is now seated at the right hand of God and making intercession for us. There is no need for that kind of intercession, because in view of Christ's finished work and God's judgment no one is able to accuse us.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "There is no need... for our Lord to defend the believer. He has already done so, 'once and for ever.' But, in any case, it is God the Father himself who sent his Son to do the work.

There can never be any query or question in God's mind with regard to any of his children."

In view of that, what does intercession mean here? In this context it must refer to Jesus' prayers for his people, much like his great prayer of John 17, in which he prays for and receives all possible benefits of his death for them for the living of their Christian lives.

It means that there is no need you can possibly have to which the Lord Jesus Christ is indifferent.

It means that there is no problem to which he will turn a deaf ear or for which he will refuse to entreat his Father on your behalf.

Let me share a paragraph on this subject from the writing of Donald Grey Barnhouse, which has blessed me:

You do not have a problem too great for the power of Christ. You do not have a problem too complicated for the wisdom of Christ. You do not have a problem too small for the love of Christ. You do not have a sin too deep for the atoning blood of Christ. One of the most wonderful phrases ever spoken about Jesus is that which is found on several occasions in the gospels. It is that "Jesus was moved with compassion." He loved men and women. He loves you. [Do] you have a problem? He can meet it, it does not matter what it is. The moment that the problem comes to you in your life, he knows all about it.... If there is a fear in your heart, it is immediately known to him. If there is a sorrow in your heart, it is immediately a sorrow to his heart. If there is a grief in your heart, it is immediately a grief to his heart. If there is a bereavement in your life or any other emotion that comes to any child of God, the same sorrow, grief or bereavement is immediately written on the heart of Christ. We find written in the Word of God, "In all their afflictions he was afflicted" (Isa. 63:9).

Jesus intercedes for us in precisely those things. Moreover, he is heard in his intercession, and he ministers to you out of the inexhaustible treasure house of his glory. That is why Paul was able to write to the

Philippians, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).

Bobby McFerrin, the popular singer and entertainer, has a little song called "Don't worry; be happy." It made him famous. I like the song, even though I know it is misleading for anyone whose sin is not atoned for by the blood of Christ. A person in his or her sin *should* worry. There is no happiness for one who stands under God's dreadful condemnation. But "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"! That first verse of Romans 8 tells us what the chapter is all about. There can be none because Jesus has died in our place, been raised for our justification, is seated at the right hand of God, and is even now carrying on a work of intercession for us.

Should people with such an intercessor worry? In their case, "don't worry" is a proper thing to say. And so is "be happy," though those words are undoubtedly too weak. We should rejoice with joy unspeakable.

Chapter 119.
No Separation from Christ's Love

Romans 8:35-36

Next to the bare facts of salvation, the greatest lesson a Christian can learn is that nothing can separate him or her from the love of Jesus Christ, which is the love of God. The world's values, entertainments, and sins are at odds with a believer's great calling and destiny. Yet all Christians can know that none of these things can triumph over them. Like a mountain climber ascending a dangerous precipice behind his guide, secured only by a rope, the Christian walks through life secured by the stout cord of God's love. Because the way is treacherous, any believer may often slip and fall. But a disciple of Jesus Christ is secure, because every Christian is bound to God by a gracious, unchanging, eternal, and indestructible love.

The Last Great Question

That is the point to which we come as we turn to the last of the five unanswerable questions Paul asks in the final paragraph of Romans 8. We have seen that the first three questions were unanswerable because of what God has done for us.

1. "Who can be against us?" No one can be against us, because God is for us, and God is the greatest force of all.
2. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" God will give the lesser gifts, because he has already given the greatest gift of all in Jesus.
3. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" No one will or can, because God has already justified his elect people.

The fourth question, which we looked at carefully in the previous study, is unanswerable because of what Jesus himself has done. "Who is he that condemns?" No one can condemn, because Jesus died, was raised from the dead, has ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father, and is even now interceding for us.

Having explored these four possible threats to our security—opposition, an imagined limit to
God's gracious provisions for us, accusations, and condemnations—and having answered that in
God we have a Champion, a Benefactor, a Judge, and an Intercessor, Paul now comes to the climax of his series of mounting rhetorical questions and asks the one that brings him to the very top of the mountain.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

This question is also unanswerable, because there is no one nor anything that can be imagined to do it, even though Paul brings forth a

long list of imagined separators. The only possible conclusion is the one we stated as we began these studies of Romans 8. As I said then, Romans 8 begins with "no condemnation" and ends with "no separation. There is "no separation," because nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

When Hostile Forces Assail Us

Sometimes Christians are accused of being unrealistic. This is probably accurate in some instances. Yet it is not true of Paul. When Paul says that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," he is not closing his eyes or shutting his ears to the hostile and destructive forces that surround the Christian at all times. On the contrary, he actually opens his arms to these forces and invites them to come forward, saying nevertheless and at the same time that they will never succeed in detaching us from Jesus Christ.

What are the forces arrayed against us? Paul lists seven in this verse, maybe choosing this number to suggest completeness. These are great forces, yet although they are great, all of them will fail.

1. *Trouble.* The first circumstance of life that might be thought able to separate a Christian from the love of Jesus Christ is "trouble" or, as the older King James Version of the Bible has it, "tribulation." I will focus on the KJV translation of this word, because "tribulation" does a better job of capturing the idea of hard circumstances pressing down upon us than does the less colorful "trouble" that the New International Version uses. The Greek word is *thlipsis,* which has to do with pressure.

The English word *tribulation* comes directly from the Latin noun *tribulum,* which meant a "threshing sledge." In the ancient world at the time of the grain harvest, the stalks of grain were brought to the threshing floor and a wooden threshing instrument, like a sled covered on the bottom with strips of metal, was dragged over the stalks to separate the heads of grain from the chaff. This instrument was called a

tribulum because it pressed out the grain. This vivid picture produced the idea embodied in the word *tribulation*, because circumstances frequently press down on people so forcefully and unremittingly that it seems to them that they are being threshed like stalks of grain.

Perhaps you have experienced such harsh pressures. Life has been hard. You may have been abused as a child, have lost your job, have been deprived of a husband or wife or other family member, have undergone severe illness. Your strength may be nearly gone. But, says Paul, you may know that no tribulation, however severe, will separate you from Christ's love.

2. *Hardship.* The second circumstance of life that Paul thinks of as a possible separator is "hardship," which embodies a slightly different idea. The Greek word is *stenochōria*, and it is composed of two separate words, which mean "narrow" (*stenos*) and "space" or "territory" (*chōra*) respectively. So the idea is not so much that of being pressed down by circumstances, which is what "tribulation" means, but rather that of being confined within a narrow and oppressive space.

In our time I am convinced that many more people experience distress of this nature than outright pressures. Take the example of a man who is in a dead-end job. He entered his company with hopes for advancement, but he is now in his late forties and has been passed over for promotions several times. It is getting to where he cannot make a good lateral move, and he knows he will not move up much in the company, if at all. Meanwhile, he is married, with a wife and children to support and a mortgage to pay. He sometimes thinks of being free of these confining circumstances, but he knows that he cannot break free and still honor his commitments.

Or again, imagine a woman who is in her late thirties with two or three children who make tremendous demands on her, who has to survive on a rather meager budget, and who knows there is no future for her apart

from the present circle of school, supermarket, baby-sitters, and the other marks of a most confined life.

How are you to triumph in such circumstances? The best way is to realize that Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, has fixed his love upon you and that nothing is ever going to separate you from his love. You may be in narrow straits now, but you are an heir of heaven, and one day your horizons will be as vast as the universe and as soaring as the stars. Nothing will deprive you of this destiny, because nothing, not even hardship, will be able to separate you from Christ's love.

3. *Persecution.* The Greek word for "persecution" (*diōkō*) contains the idea of being pursued by someone intent on our harm. It denotes harm that is relentless. What about such relentless persecutions? Very few of us suffer much outright persecution today, though Christians in other parts of the world endure it. But there are subtle persecutions, and there will undoubtedly be stronger and more outright persecutions if the present secularizing trends of western life continue.

Two things we can be sure of: (1) persecutions are a normal response to any forthright Christian witness or stand, and (2) we will experience them to the extent that we confront the world with Christ's claims. They may be as subtle as being shunned by those who regard themselves as quite sophisticated and Christians as being hopelessly "out of it" and dull. "Persecution" may mean being passed over for some honor or promotion. Ministers may experience this from a superior who pushes them into obscure posts because they are more interested in teaching the Word of God, with all its harsh edges, than in promoting the denominational programs. At times, particularly when Christians stand against some great national malaise, believers may even be sued in court to hush them up or render them ineffective.

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). Persecutions may separate us from a more lucrative worldly future or a more attractive image before the world, but persecutions will never separate us from Christ's love.

4. *Famine.* Most of the ancient world experienced famine at one time or another. Famine could result from lack of rain and the failure of crops; from natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, floods, or locust plagues; or from war. Since those factors still exist today, hunger has not been eliminated for much of the world's population, despite technological advances in agricultural methods and the humanitarian efforts of those more fortunate. Hunger is a terrible thing. But even this cannot detach us from Christ, says Paul.

5. *Nakedness.* Today this word usually implies the state of undress normally associated with sexual activity or pornography. But in Paul's day it had to do more with poverty so severe that the person so afflicted was unable to buy the clothes he or she needed. It is a corresponding term to famine and, like it, may refer to economic hard times deriving from natural disasters or war.

6. *Danger.* Dangers, too, are of various types, though the focus here is on those to which Christians are exposed simply because they are Christians. Just as in New Testament times, in some countries Christians are arrested, tried, and imprisoned. In others they are attacked, beaten, and even killed.

I like what Robert Haldane wrote on this point:

These [dangers], at some times, and in some countries, are exceedingly many and great; and at all times, and in all countries, are more or less numerous and trying. If God were not their protector, even in this land of freedom, the followers of the Lamb would be cut off or injured. It is the Lord's providence that averts such injuries, or overrules events for the protection of his people. This too is little considered even by themselves, and would be thought a most unfounded calumny or a fantastical idea by the world. But let the Christian habitually consider his safety and protection as secured by the Lord, rather than by the liberality of the times. That time never yet was when the Lord's people could be safe, if circumstances removed restraint from the wicked. Those who boast of their unbounded liberality would, if in situations

calculated to develop their natural hatred of the truth, prove, after all, bitter persecutors.

7. *Sword.* The last of these seven terms pushes the violence implied in the earlier ones to their furthest extremity, viewing circumstances in which Christians are executed or even murdered for their faith. This happened in the early church. Stephen was an early martyr. So was James. Others followed, and there was soon a trail of Christian blood to mark the progress of the gospel from land to land and through history.

So frequent and so vivid had this been, even by the time Paul wrote Romans, that the apostle felt compelled to establish martyrdom as a prophesied biblical datum, which he does by quoting Psalm 44:22: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." This has been literally true throughout history, which is Paul's point. Mission societies and organizations that deal with international violations of human rights say that even today as many as 600,000 Christians are killed every year for their faith. Even if, as is the case in our country, we are not literally being put to death for our religion, we are nevertheless regularly regarded in as low a fashion as the quotation from Psalms suggests—as sheep fit only for slaughter.

Christ's Love for Us

In view of these many dangers, toils, and cares that come into the lives of Christians, how can Paul say that there is nothing that can separate us from Christ's love? The answer, of course, is the nature of that love. It is high and long and broad and deep. It is eternal. The phrase "love of Christ" can mean either our love for Christ or Christ's love for us, but it is evident in this context that it is Christ's love for us and not our love for him that is the basis of our security and Paul's confidence.

Christ's love draws us out of ourselves and to him in the first place. It draws and wins disciples.

Years ago, Tenth Presbyterian Church supported a missionary to Korea whose name was Harold Voekel. He was in Korea at the time of the Korean War. He was drafted into the army and assigned to the prisoner-

of-war camps as a chaplain. Tens of thousands of North Koreans were imprisoned in these camps. Some were Communists. They were active in stirring up riots and rebellion. When Voekel entered the first camp he immediately won the men's interest because he could speak their language. He said he wanted to teach them a song. It was the Korean version of our familiar children's hymn, often taught in Sunday school.

Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong;
They are weak, but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so.

When Chaplain Voekel had finished teaching this in one camp, he went to a second camp and so on until he had covered all the POW camps in Korea. Then he went around again, this time teaching a few simple things about this person Jesus, who loved the Koreans. He did this for months. Thousands became believers. Discipline in the camps improved. The Communists had difficulty finding followers. When the truce finally came and the country was divided at the infamous 38th Parallel, thousands of these former prisoners of war refused to return to North Korea and Communism and instead chose to live in the south where they could continue to learn about and worship Jesus.

There is no greater message than the message of the love of Jesus Christ for us. It has captured the imagination and won the hearts of widespread millions throughout history.

The love of Christ satisfies those it has drawn and won as disciples. And the proof is this: Once the soul has tasted Christ's love, it can never be satisfied with anything else. Not all the pleasures, not all the idols of this earth can satisfy the person who has known the love of Christ. One of our hymns puts it nicely when it says,

Draw and win and fill completely,
'Til the cup o'erflows the brim;
What have we to do with idols
Who have companied with him?

The love of Christ not only draws and satisfies, it also keeps us safe forever. This is what Paul is chiefly saying in this paragraph. Here is a great passage on this theme by Donald Grey Barnhouse:

The love of Christ was eternal, for it was that love which moved him to leave heaven's throne and come down to this earth to redeem us. That love was deep, for it was that love which urged him on to the end of the road as he humbled himself to the death, even the death of the cross. That love was broad, for it was that love which opened the arms of God to all the world of sinners and made it possible for the very ones who nailed him to the cross to be forgiven and come back to the Father's heart. And that love is unchanging, for it is that love which comes to us today in the midst of our need, whatever it may be, and takes us out of darkness and into light, and from doubt to certainty, and from death to life.

In our text that love is presented to us in the phase of its permanence. God stoops to tell us that
Christ is not fickle. What amazing condescension that such a verse should be in the Bible. The Lord leaves heaven and comes down to earth; he allows himself to be led to the judgment hall where he is buffeted and spat upon. He walks to Calvary and permits men to nail him to the cross. From that cross he cries out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We see these things happen and he tells us that they have happened for us.... We look upon him with amazement, and wonder if he really means it. Then he smiles at us and tells us that he really does mean it and that he really does love us, and that nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from that love.

Paul's Sufferings and Christ's Love

I do not know how you are reacting to this, but I can guess how at least some are. There are some who will comment, "Well, that is all right for

Paul to say, since he was an apostle and undoubtedly enjoyed special privileges. I am only a normal Christian. Can this really apply to me?"

If you are saying that, let me remind you of Paul's experiences. True, he was an apostle. But this meant that it was his lot to endure greater rather than lesser hardships than ourselves, in both quantity and degree. He writes about them in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29:

... I have worked much harder, been in prisons more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Everything Paul speaks about in Romans 8 as a possible separator from the love of God in Jesus Christ is included in these verses as something Paul himself had experienced or was in danger of facing. Eventually, as we know, he was martyred. So Paul is not writing from some ivory tower or speaking "off the wall," as we say. He knew it all. Yet none of these things separated him from Christ's love, and today he is in the presence of Christ in heaven and will be forever.

So will it be for you, if you have truly tasted of Christ's love. This love is the greatest thing in the universe. Why settle for less?

Chapter 120.
More Than Conquerors

Romans 8:37

There are passages of the Bible that are so familiar that we often pass over truths that would be startling if we were coming to them for the first time. Romans 8:37 is an example. We have just been reminded in the previous verse, by a quotation from the Old Testament, that the people of God "face death all day long" and are "considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Ps. 44:22). But now, in verse 37, we are told that nevertheless we are all "more than conquerors."

Sheep that conquer? We can think of lions that conquer, or wolves or polar bears or wild buffalo.
Edgar Allan Poe even spoke of "the conquering worm," meaning that at last death comes to all. But sheep? The very idea of sheep as conquerors seems ludicrous.

This is figurative language, of course. But the image is not meaningless, nor is it as ludicrous as it seems. In contrast to the world and its power, Christians are indeed weak and despised. They are as helpless as a flock of sheep. But they are in fact conquerors, because they have been loved by the Lord Jesus Christ and have been made conquerors "through him."

Yet even that is not the most startling thing about this verse, for the victory of Christians is described as being *more than* an ordinary victory. In the Greek text a single compound verb, *hypernikōmen*, lies behind the five English words "we are more than conquerors." The middle part of the word is the simple verb *nikaō*, meaning "to overcome" or "to conquer." (The famous statue "Winged Victory" in the Louvre in Paris is called a Nike, which means "victory" and was the name given to the goddess of victory in Ancient Greece.) The first part of the verb, *hyper*, means "in place of," "over and above," or "more than." From it we get our word *super,* which means almost the same thing. When we put the two parts of the word together we find Paul saying that believers are all "super-conquerors," or "more than conquerors" in Jesus Christ.

But how can that be? How can those who are despised and rejected—troubled, persecuted, exposed to famine and nakedness, danger and sword—how can such people be thought of as overcomers, super-overcomers at that?

It is a question worth pondering—and answering. Let me suggest a few reasons we may think like this.

Against Supernatural Forces

The first reason why the victory given to Christians by Jesus Christ is a superlative victory and why we are "more than conquerors" is that we are fighting against an enemy who is more than human.

This is the note on which Paul ends his letter to the Ephesians, reminding the Christians at Ephesus that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). In this passage Paul is thinking of the devil and his hosts, and he is saying that our battle, however human it may seem, is actually supernatural. It is a spiritual battle. If our enemies were mere human beings or mere natural forces, our victory, if we achieved it, would be a natural victory. But, as it is, our foes are supernatural, and therefore our victories are supernatural, too. We are more than conquerors.

The devil is the embodiment of these hostile spiritual forces, and he is a cunning foe. I have often said that we must not overrate Satan's strength, as if he were the evil equivalent of God. Satan is a creature. Therefore he is not omnipresent, omniscient, or omnipotent. Only God is that.

However, Satan is very dangerous.

And crafty! The devil devises more schemes in a minute than we can conceive in a lifetime, and all of them are directed toward our destruction. How can we stand against such an evil, crafty foe, let alone be a "super-conqueror" of him and his forces? It is not in our own

strength, of course. It is as the text says: "through him who loved us." Martin Luther stood against these spiritual forces, prevailed over them through Christ, and wrote about it in the hymn we know as "A Mighty Fortress":

> Did we in our own strength confide,
> Our striving would be losing;
> Were not the right Man on our side,
> The Man of God's own choosing.
> Dost ask who that may be?
> Christ Jesus, it is he;
> Lord Sabaoth his Name,
> From age to age the same,
> And he must win the battle.

None of us could stand against Satan's hostile forces even for a moment, but in Jesus Christ we can stand firm and fight on to victory.

Lifelong Battles

Second, Christians are "more than conquerors" because the warfare we are engaged in requires us to fight lifelong battles.

In his excellent study of this verse Donald Grey Barnhouse sharply contrasts our battles as Christians with the limited battles other soldiers fight: "In earthly battles soldiers are sometimes called upon to fight day and night. But there comes a moment when flesh and blood cannot take more and the struggle comes to an end through the utter exhaustion of the soldier. But in the spiritual warfare there is no armistice, no truce, no interval. The text is in the present tense... in the Greek: 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long' (RSV). From the moment we are made partakers of the divine nature, we are the targets of the world, the flesh and the devil. There is never a moment's reprieve. It follows, then, that our conquest is more than a conquest, and thus we are more than conquerors."

Eternal Results

The third reason why Christians are more than conquerors is that the spiritual victories achieved by God's people are eternal. This is a very important point and one we need to remind ourselves of constantly.

We are creatures of time, and we live in a perishing world. Apart from spiritual battles and spiritual victories, everything we accomplish will pass away, no matter how great an earthly "victory" may seem in the world's eyes or our own. How can it be otherwise when even "heaven and earth will pass away" (Matt. 24:35)? Great monuments will crumble. Works of art will decay. Fortunes will be dissipated. Heroes will die. Even great triumphs of the human intellect or emotion will be forgotten. Not so with spiritual victories, for our spiritual victories impart meaning to the very history of the cosmos.

I am convinced that this is what our earthly struggles are about and that this is how we are to view them. When Satan rebelled against God sometime in eternity past, God was faced with a choice, humanly speaking. He could have annihilated Satan and those fallen angels, now demons, who rebelled with Satan against God. But that would not have proved that God's way of running the universe is right. It would only have proved that God is more powerful than Satan. So, instead of punishing Satan immediately, God allowed Satan's rebellion to run its course. In the meantime God created a universe and a new race of beings, mankind, in which the rebellion of Satan would be tested. Satan could have his way for a while. He could try to order things according to his will rather than God's. He would even be allowed to seduce the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, into following him in his rebellion.

But God would reserve the right to call out a new people to himself, the very people Paul has been writing about in Romans 8. These individuals would be foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified—all according to God's sovereign will. And when they were called they would be thrust into the spiritual struggle that Satan and his demons had brought upon the race. Satan would be allowed to attack, persecute, and even kill God's people. But for them, for those who have been brought to know the love of God in Christ Jesus, these sufferings would not be

an intolerable hardship but would instead be a privilege that they would count themselves happy to endure for Jesus.

I am convinced that in his supreme wisdom God has ordered history in such a way that for every child of Satan who is suffering, a child of God is suffering in exactly the same circumstances. And for every child of Satan who enjoys the fullness of this world's pleasures, there is a child of God who is denied those pleasures.

The unbeliever curses his or her lot if deprived and made to suffer. The believer trusts and praises God and looks to him for ultimate deliverance. Unbelievers boast of their superiority if they are fortunate in securing this world's success or treasure. Believers acknowledge God as the source of whatever good fortune they enjoy, and if deprived of these things, as is frequently the case, they say, as Job did, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21b).

And the angels look on, as they also did in Job's case. "Is Satan's way best?" they ask. "Does the way of the evil one produce joy? Does it make him and God's other creatures happy? Or is the way of God best? Are believers the truly happy ones, in spite of their suffering?"

We, too, may pose such questions, and even wonder about the truth of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit....
> Blessed are those who mourn....
> Blessed are the meek....
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness....
> Blessed are the merciful....
> Blessed are the pure in heart....
> Blessed are the peacemakers....
> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness....
> Matthew 5:2-10

Those words are indeed true! They are profoundly true. They are what God's people are proving every day of their lives as they suffer and in

some cases are put to death, being literally counted "as sheep to be slaughtered."

"But the poor in spirit are despised," someone says. True enough, but "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "But those who mourn, mourn alone," says another.

They often do, in human terms. But when they mourn an unseen presence stands beside them, Jesus himself, and they are truly "comforted." They know "the peace of God, which transcends all [human] understanding" (Phil 4:7). "But the meek are crushed and beaten down."

In this world they are. Indeed, for God's sake "we face death all day long." But our kingdom is not here, any more than Jesus' kingdom was here, though in the end we will "inherit [even] the earth."

"But those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are strange, odd. Most people don't want to have anything to do with them."

True, but their longings will be satisfied by God himself, while those who seek earthly pleasures will fall short of joys here and in the end will be cast into the lake of fire, where thirst is never quenched.

"But the pure in heart have no welcome here, no secure place."

True enough, but they will see God. They have a home in heaven.

"Why do we need peacemakers?" asks another person. "We need strong armies to fight the world's conflicts." Peacemakers are despised. The strong and powerful are favored.

But those who make peace "will be called sons of God."

"Who would want to be persecuted, especially for righteousness' sake?"

No one, of course. But when Christians are persecuted, they count it a privilege, for it shows that they are standing with Jesus, belong to his kingdom, and have a reward laid up for them in "the kingdom of heaven."

Victories in such sufferings are eternal in the same way that the victory of our Lord upon the cross is eternal. Our sufferings endure for a moment, but they achieve an eternal victory. They point to the truth and grace of God forever. I am convinced that in the farthest reaches of heaven, in what we would call billions of years from now, there will be angels who will look on everyone who has been redeemed by Jesus Christ and thrust into spiritual warfare by him, and they will say, "Look, there is another of God's saints, one who triumphed over evil by the Lord's power!" Revelation 12:11-12 describes how they will exclaim of our great victories over Satan:

> "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony;
> they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.
> Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!"

In achieving those eternal victories, we who love the Lord Jesus Christ will have indeed been more than conquerors.

Eternal Rewards

The fourth reason why we are more than conquerors in the struggles of life is that the rewards of our victory will surpass anything ever attained by earthly conquerors.

The kings of this world generally fight for three things: territory, wealth, and glory, often all three. And they reward their soldiers with a proportionate share of these attainments. The Romans settled their soldiers on land won from their enemies, though chiefly to consolidate their territorial holdings. Armies have usually been allowed to share in war's spoils. Napoleon said that men are led by "trinkets," meaning titles, medals, and other such glory symbols. The world's soldiers have their rewards, but they are earthly rewards. The people of God look for

rewards in heaven. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "... Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever" (1 Cor. 9:24-25).

In this life, like our Master, we may wear nothing but a crown of thorns. But in heaven we will wear crowns that are incorruptible and will possess an inheritance that will never slip away.

No Greater Cause

The final reason why we are more than conquerors is that the goal of our warfare is the glory of God, and that is an infinitely worthy and utterly superior thing.

A few lines back I wrote of our reward as being imperishable crowns, using the image the Bible itself gives us. With that in mind I call your attention to a scene in Revelation 4:1-11. The setting is the throne room of heaven, and there, before the throne of Almighty God, are twenty-four elders who represent the people of God saved from all nations and all ages. They, too, are seated on thrones and wear crowns, because the saints reign with Jesus. In the center, immediately surrounding the throne, are four living creatures who cry out day and night, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (v. 8).

Whenever the four living creatures worship God with these words, the twenty-four elders rise from their thrones, fall before God, and worship him. Then—and this is the point for which I recall this picture—*they lay their crowns before the throne,* saying,

> "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power,
> for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" [v. 11].

This picture is extremely beautiful, for it shows that the crowns of victory won by God's people are won by God's grace and therefore rightly belong to him. They are our crowns, but they are laid at the

Lord's feet to show that they were won for his honor and by his strength. In this, as well as in all the other things I mentioned, we are more than conquerors.

But there is one more thing to say: The way to victory is not by "going up" to any self-achieved glory but rather by "stooping down" in suffering.

Remember the picture of Satan given in Isaiah 14? Satan said, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (vv. 13-14). But God tells Satan, "You [will be] brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit" (v. 15).

Where Satan aimed to sit is in some measure where the saints of the ages are raised, for they sit on the "mount of assembly," higher than anything except the throne of God, as we have just seen. But notice how they get there. Not by trying to dislodge the Almighty from his throne. Rather, they are exalted because they have followed in the steps of their Master, who

> *... did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,*
> *but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*
> *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!*
> *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*
> *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*
> *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Philippians 2:6-11

Jesus was the prototype—the true sheep fit only "to be slaughtered." He was "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). But he was also a super-conqueror, and we are more than conquerors through him.

Chapter 121.
The Love of God in Christ Jesus

Romans 8:38-39

There are times in every Christian's life when what is called for is a clear and ringing testimony, and there are times when what is most needed is a careful and persuasive argument supporting Christian truth. Overall, both are essential, for a personal testimony is no adequate substitute for an argument, when that is needed. Conversely, an argument is no substitute for a testimony, when that is needed. In today's wishy-washy, subjective Christian climate we need arguments especially. But, and this is the point I am making, we need personal testimonies, too.

I say this because of the final verses of our chapter. Paul has been offering arguments for why we who believe in Christ can consider ourselves eternally secure. Indeed, he seems to have brought out every possible argument he can think of. These are the arguments behind each of the five undeniable doctrines and five unanswerable questions of verses 28-37. They are basic to
Christianity itself. But there is also a time for testimony and, being a good teacher and persuader, Paul does not forget it. That is why, in verses 38 and 39, he once again writes in the first person. It is the first time he has done so since verse 18. He has given his arguments. Now we are to hear his personal convictions.

What does he write? "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, not any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our

Lord." What a glorious testimony! There is no false optimism here, for what Paul says is based upon the sound arguments of the preceding verses. But this is no mere academic presentation either. For, as anyone can immediately sense, it flows from a great and dedicated heart and is so passionate, so stirring, that most people instinctively regard this as both the climax of the chapter and the highest point of the entire letter.

In this testimony Paul faces all the possible "separators" of Christians from the love of God in Christ he can think of—he lists ten of them —and then dismisses each one.

The Gates of Death

For most people in our age, as also in the past, the most fearful of all adversaries is death—and rightly so. Apart from what we are told about death and the afterlife in Scripture, death is an unknown, save that it ends our existence here and is inescapable. That is frightening. Francis Bacon wrote rightly, "Men fear death as children fear the dark." They do. They tremble before it.

Moreover, death is the greatest of all separators. Obviously it separates us from life itself. But it also separates us from places and people we love. And it separates the soul and the spirit from the body, and separates both from God if the individual is not saved. Terrible! Yes, but for the believer in Christ this is not the final word. Death does separate us from things of the world, including other people. But it can never separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

How do we know this? We know because Christ has conquered death. He has triumphed over it.
Paul assured the Corinthians that, "'Death has been swallowed up in victory' [cf. Isa. 25:8]. 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' [cf. Hos. 13:14]. The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

Paul wrote to Timothy in the same fashion, saying that "our Savior, Christ Jesus,... has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to life through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

As a matter of fact, death, far from separating believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus, actually ushers them into an even closer relationship with him. Alexander Maclaren, who calls death "the separator," puts it nicely: "The separator becomes the uniter; he rends us apart from the world that he may 'bring us to God.' " We know God now, but only in part. In that day we shall know "fully," even as we also are known (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). And there shall be no soul "asleep" and no purgatory for those who are in Christ Jesus. Paul said that "to be away from the body" is to be "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). His personal testimony was: "... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Phil 1:23).

When William Borden of Yale lay dying in Egypt on his way to mission work in China, which he never reached, he left a farewell note that expressed a similar testimony. The note said, "No reserve, no retreat, and no regrets." Of course not! Death did not separate Borden from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Nor Even Life...

The second possible separator that Paul mentions is "life," which at first glance seems to be a strange choice of word—until we remember that life sometimes seems even more cruel than death. It is why we sometimes call death a "release" or "mercy."

Life brings separations, just as death does. The political aftermaths of wars sometimes separate members of families from one another. This has happened in Eastern Europe, China, North and South Korea, and other divided countries in our lifetimes. Sometimes poverty forces people to move away from loved ones if they have to leave their homes to find jobs. And consider sickness or the encroaching limitations of old age. As we age, mobility becomes increasingly limited, eyesight and hearing fail, minds and memories dim. In these things we experience

separation from the simple pleasures the world once offered us. But there is no separation from God's love.

Let me give you an example.

In the week I prepared this study I received a letter from a man who had attended Tenth Presbyterian Church about twenty-five years ago. His story was a sad one. He had slipped into homosexuality in his youth, and by his own confession his lifestyle had cost him his family—he had a wife and children—his profession, and his health. This man now had AIDS, and he was writing to say that during his terrible illness he had found the Lord and wanted to receive the weekly cassette version of "The Bible Study Hour," which he knew of and had found spiritually nourishing.

Here is what he wrote: "Unfortunately, I am losing my eyesight due to AIDS. I'm reading your material as fast as I can, before I find myself unable to do so.... Your tapes will enable me to continue my studies after the light fails.... I have become obsessed with God. I can't get enough of his Word. He literally has become my sole incentive to live. I have lost so much already and am losing everything else, but I cannot lose him. He is the only reason I hold on to life, miserable as it is. My living now is preparing me for eternity."

I found myself greatly touched by that letter, particularly at this point in our studies, since it is such a marvelous testimony to the truth that even life's misery cannot separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Neither Angels nor Demons

When Paul mentions "angels" and "demons" as his next pair of possible separators, he confuses most readers, since we cannot be absolutely certain of what he is referring to. The word *angels* usually means *"good* angels," but many have wondered how beneficent beings can be thought of as ever trying to separate believers from Christ. For that reason, some commentators have taken the word to refer to *fallen* angels or demons, and the second term to refer to the "principalities" or earthly

"authorities" they are sometimes said to control. The King James Bible and some other versions translate this second word as "principalities."

The problem with this is that Paul seems to be deliberately introducing contrasting pairs of terms in these verses: four pairs, with two single terms thrown in. If that is his pattern, the contrast in this pair must be between good and bad angels.

Can good angels ever try to separate us from Christ? No. But Paul may sometimes speak of them hypothetically as doing what we know they could never actually do, as in Galatians 1:8—"Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" I favor this view and judge that here Paul is not thinking so much in rationally exclusive terms as he is simply sweeping over all creation to deny that anything or anyone anywhere could ever succeed in destroying our eternal security in Christ. In the first pair of possible separators Paul has looked at our most immediate experiences: life and death. In the second he looks to the realm of spirit beings and declares that not one of them, whatever that being may be like, can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

It is good for us to know this, because—although we do not fear the good angels (they are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation," Heb. 1:14)—we are rightly on guard against the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). These forces create havoc among all types of people. They produce separations, because evil divides. Indeed, the very name "devil" (Greek, *diabolos*) means "separator." But although the fallen angels can produce many kinds of divisions, there is nothing they can do that can ever separate us from Christ.

How do we know this? We know it because Jesus has defeated these evil forces at the cross. Paul told the Colossians, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having

disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:13-15).

The Tide of Time

Having addressed the experiences of life and death and expanded his circle of possible separators to include angelic forces, both good and evil, Paul now thinks in terms of time, arguing that neither present things nor future things can separate us from God's love in Christ. "Time is powerless against believers," says one commentator.

The fact that Paul speaks of "present" and "future" and not *"past"* and "future" (which we might expect) shows that he is still thinking carefully, even though casting about in the broadest possible fashion. He does not say "past," because nothing in the past *has* separated us from Christ. We are in Christ now. Ah, but what of the present? What about those hard things that are pressing in on us at this very moment? They cannot separate us from Christ, says Paul. Jesus is equal to them. What about the future? What about things to come? They cannot separate us from Christ either, Paul adds.

In my judgment, there are two equally valid ways to think of this pair of words, and both may be correct.

On the one hand, we might think solely of earthbound circumstances, what we regard as the flotsam and jetsam of history and our daily lives. We are buffeted by circumstances now, and we will be buffeted by circumstances in future days until we die. But none of these circumstances will separate us from the love of God in Christ, because the God who has loved us in his Son controls history. He is the God of circumstances. So there is nothing that has come into our lives, is already in our lives, or will come into our lives that has not been filtered through the perfect and loving will of our heavenly Father and been directed by him to our good. That is why Paul was able to say just verses earlier, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." (Rom. 8:28).

Joseph said the same thing, in spite of the terrible experiences God allowed him to pass through. He told his brothers, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:19-20).

On the other hand, Paul's use of the words *present* and *future* may refer to what we would call "this life" and "the life to come." Nothing here and nothing hereafter can separate us from God's love. We have talked about "here." What about "hereafter"? We remember a verse saying that "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Ah, judgment! That is what lies in our hereafter and what we indeed must fear, if we are not in Christ. Yet how can we fear it if we *are* "in him"? In that case, we know there is nothing to fear, for Jesus has borne the judgment in our place. There are still judgments to come, true enough. But even these cannot separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Nor Any Powers

It is hard to know what Paul is thinking of when he speaks of "powers," particularly since he adds it as a freestanding term, without linking it to a matching word, as he has done with the other possible separators thus far. The word in Greek is *dynameis*, which can refer to miraculous signs or miracles, though here it would seem to mean heavenly or spiritual forces. The only problem is that we find it hard to think of spiritual powers that are not already included in the phrase "neither angels nor demons." I suspect that in this context "powers" probably looks back to those that have already been mentioned—powers of death and life, powers of angels and demons, powers of the present and of the future—and says in summary fashion that there are no powers anywhere that can divide us from Christ.

Can you think of any? Can any force anywhere separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, if neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future can do so?

Neither Height Nor Depth

In the fourth (and last) of his matched pairs, Paul turns from human experience, spiritual powers, and time and considers space, saying that "neither height nor depth" will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What does this pair of terms mean? If the words merely describe space, the phrase means that nothing above us and nothing below us can separate us from Christ. Alexander Maclaren takes this view, expressing it well. He says, "The love of God is everywhere." If this is the meaning, it would be an expression of the thought found in the well-known verses of Psalm 139:7-10:

> Where can I go from your Spirit?
> Where can I flee from your presence?
> If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
> If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
> even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

On the other hand, it may be significant that the Greek words translated "height" (*hypsoma*) and "depth" (*bathos*) were used in the ancient world in astrology to describe a point directly overhead, above the horizon, and a point directly downward, below the horizon. These points were used in forecasting horoscopes. Some commentators find this to be their meaning. If this is correct, the teaching is that even so-called astrological powers cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Nor Anything Else

After the sweeping terms of the first part of these verses the closing single item "nor anything else in all creation" is almost an anticlimax. But that is all right. In fact, it is effective precisely for that reason, for it is as if Paul has run out of words in his verbal search for possible

"separators" and ends up saying simply, "nor anything else, anything else at all."

What does "anything else in all creation" include? The answer is that it includes everything that exists except God, since God has created all these other things. Thus, if God is for us and if God controls everything else, since he has made it, then absolutely nothing anywhere will be able to separate us from his love for us in Christ Jesus.

That reminds me of the word we looked at briefly as we began this section, the word *convinced.* This is Paul's personal testimony, as I said, but it is a testimony based on the soundest evidence, evidence that had persuaded Paul and should persuade us also. What are the grounds of this persuasion? Paul's conviction is not based on the intensity of his feelings or a belief that the harsh circumstances of life are bound to improve or that any of these separating factors will somehow be dissolved or go away. Rather, it is based on the greatness of God's love for us in Christ, and that awesome love has been made known in that God sent his Son to die in our place.

There is nothing in all the universe greater or more steadfast than that love. *Therefore,* nothing in all the universe can separate us from it:

> Not death, not life
> Not angels, not demons
> Not the present, not even the future
> Not any power
> Not height, not depth
> Not anything else in all creation.

I do not know of anything greater than that. And I do not know of any better way of ending our studies of Romans 8 than to say again that this is Paul's testimony, born out of his own careful study of the Scriptures and his own personal experience of the love and grace of God.

So I ask of you: Is this *your* testimony? Have you been persuaded of these truths, as Paul was? Can you say, "I no longer have any doubts. I know that salvation is entirely of God and that he will keep me safe

until the very end"? If you are not certain of these truths, it is because you are still looking at yourself. You are thinking of your own feeble powers and not of God and his omnipotence.

As far as I am concerned, I am persuaded and I am glad I am. There is nothing in all of heaven and earth to compare to this assurance.

Romans, Volume 3
God and History (Romans 9-11)

To HIM from whom,

through whom, and to whom are all things

Preface

I am writing the preface to the third volume on my studies of Romans the same week I have finished my studies of the magnificent doxology with which the apostle Paul ends the great eleventh chapter:

> Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

I have been blessed as I studied this doxology. But I have also realized in a fresh way that it expresses the secret of Paul's extraordinary power as a teacher of the things of God. Paul did not begin with man, as we tend to do in our man-oriented, need-directed churches. Paul began with God! Moreover, he continued with God, knowing that anything of true spiritual value is accomplished only through God and by God's power. And he ended with God, too, in the sense that everything he did was for God's glory.

What a difference it would make if our churches could recapture the apostle's God-centered and God-directed orientation. But, of course, it is not likely to happen, not in the direction we are going. Instead of thinking about God more and coming to know him better, today's Christians spend most of their time thinking about themselves and are therefore bogged down in miserable self-contemplation and analysis,

instead of being set free to love and serve God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength.

This sad prevailing attitude has had its bearing on the study of Romans 9-11, or perhaps I should say on a neglect of a study of these chapters. I do not think it is too much to say that few Christians study them at all, and few preachers preach on them at all. Why? Because they are difficult, perhaps. But most of all because they are focused on the glory and ways of God, more than any other comparable section of the Bible, and because they pull us along in directions we find it uncomfortable to travel.

These themes will stretch our minds—and mind stretching, like any other kind of rigorous exercise, will be painful. But it will be good for us, and it is necessary for us if we are to be strong Christians, equipped by God to challenge the errors and evils of our age with a truly robust Christianity.

In each of my books I like to thank the Session and congregation of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for encouraging me in this kind of careful Bible study and exegetical, doctrinal preaching. I believe they have profited from it over the quarter-century I have been the senior minister of the church, and I know I have. To them and to some others, the material in this book will be somewhat familiar, since the chapters are essentially the sermons I preached to the Tenth Presbyterian congregation from September 1990 to July 1992. They were also aired over the internationally heard "Bible Study Hour" broadcast during 1991 and 1992.

No religion is stronger than its god, and in the case of Christianity, no Christians have ever been stronger than their knowledge of the true God and their desire to obey and glorify him. May God bless these studies to lead many to know more of the character and the greatness of our God, and may many be revitalized as a result. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania

Part Eleven: Paul and His People

Chapter 122.
What in the World is God Doing?

Romans 9:1-5

In the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of Romans, we are dealing with a Christian philosophy of history. It is a philosophy that we can ask as a question, namely: "What in the world is God doing?" Or we can be a bit more precise and ask: "What is God doing in world history?" Or even: "What is he doing with me? Where have I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going when I die?"

There has never been a more important moment in which to ask these questions, because people in our day have lost, not only the Christian answers to them but even the hope of finding them. The great art historian Erwin Panofsky, in a book called *Studies in Iconology,* has pointed out how the figure of Father Time has changed in western art history. In the ancient world, time was pictured positively. It was portrayed by symbols of speed, power, balance, and fertility. In our world, time is pictured as an aged man, accompanied by a scythe, representing death, and an hourglass. In other words, time is pictured negatively. Panofsky terms our view "Time the Destroyer" and traces it to our failure to find any genuine meaning either in world history or in our own personal histories.

Our view is that of the carnival barker's cry as the revolving wheel of fortune turns: "Round and round and round she goes, and where she stops, nobody knows."

Henry Ford said the same thing when, by a different use of language, he called history "bunk."

This is not the Christian view, nor is it the teaching of Romans. The Christian view is not negative, because it sees God at the beginning of history (taking charge of it), the cross of Jesus Christ at the center of

history (giving it meaning), and the return of Christ at the end of history (bringing it to a triumphant conclusion). For the Christian, time and history are pregnant with eternal meaning.

The Place and Themes of Romans 9-11

In one sense that is the theme of the next great section of Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 9 through 11. But these chapters are not introduced into a vacuum. They are linked to what has already been written.

Not every commentator has seen this. C. H. Dodd is impressed with the fact that the opening words of chapter 9 do not have any part of speech deliberately linking them to chapter 8. So he imagines that what we have in chapters 9 through 11 is a separate Pauline composition, a "kind of sermon," that "he kept by him... for use as occasion demanded." Well, it is true that Romans 911 can stand by itself. Even more significantly, it is easy to see how the last part of Romans, chapters 12 through 16, could follow easily from chapter 8. That would replicate a pattern often found in Paul's letters. But apart from the fact that it is difficult to imagine Paul carrying manuscripts of his sermons around with him and preaching from them, it is really only possible to understand these chapters by seeing their close connection to what has gone before.

For one thing, they are a necessary exposition of Paul's original thesis, stated in Romans 1:16. Paul wrote there that he was "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." That is an important statement, but until this point Paul has not shown how the gospel had been presented first to Judaism. In fact, this priority appears to have been contradicted by the large-scale unbelief of this people.

And that leads to the second matter linking the earlier portions of the letter with these chapters. Paul has completed a chapter in which the eternal security of the believer has been unfolded in glowing and profoundly moving terms. He has declared that "neither death nor life,

neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). But can we really believe that if, as an observable fact, those upon whom God had previously set his electing love, the Jewish people, have been cast off? It is all very well to affirm that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. But can we believe that if many Jews, who as a people have preceded us in the long, historical, unfolding plan of salvation, have been abandoned by God and are lost?

Recognizing this progression, one commentator has called chapters 9 through 11 the very
"climax of Romans," believing that everything before this is intended to lead to its conclusions. This is probably an overstatement. But it is also equally an understatement to regard these chapters merely as "a kind of postscript," as another writer does.

Robert Haldane (along with others) has a good balance when he writes, "Paul... has discoursed largely on the justification and sanctification of believers, and now he proceeds to treat particularly of the doctrine of predestination, and to exhibit the sovereignty of God in his dealings both towards Jews and Gentiles. The way in which, in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters, he so particularly adverts to the present state and future destination of the Jews, in connection with what regards the Gentiles, furnishes the most ample opportunity for the illustration of this highly important subject."

In following through on these themes, Paul introduces some of the most profound and mindstretching material to be found anywhere in the Bible. We will see, as we study these chapters:
(1) the historical advantages of Judaism; (2) the importance and biblical proof of election; (3) the doctrine of reprobation; (4) the justice of God in saving some and passing by others; (5) the glory of God displayed in his judgments; (6) the reason for Jewish failure to believe on Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah; (7) the place and power of gospel preaching in

God's plan; (8) the importance of Christian missions; (9) what God is doing in the present age, and why; (10) the eventual salvation of the Jews as a nation; and (11) the great and indescribable knowledge and wisdom of God that guides it all.

Has the Word of God Failed?

All those themes will occupy us in due course. But, as we begin, it is important to see the overall outline of these chapters as they apply to the central question Paul is raising, namely: Has God's saving purpose toward the Jewish nation failed? It is the question he raises implicitly in verse 6. Paul's answer is a firm "No," for the following seven reasons.

1. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *all whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved* (Rom. 9:6-24).

The apostle begins his discussion by distinguishing between national, visible Israel and spiritual Israel, consisting of those whom God has chosen to know Christ. He also speaks of Abraham's natural descendants and the children of promise, which makes the same distinction. The point is that membership in the outward, visible Jewish nation did not guarantee salvation, any more than outward, visible membership in a Christian denomination guarantees the salvation of church members today. What determines salvation is the electing grace of God in Christ, and that has always been a separate matter from any national or organizational distinctives.

Paul cites election in the earliest generations of descent from Abraham, showing that Isaac was chosen rather than Ishmael, and that Jacob was chosen rather than Esau. He proves his point by quoting Exodus 33:19:

> *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*
>
> *Romans 9:15*

2. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *God had previously revealed that not all Israel would be*

saved and that some Gentiles would be (Rom. 9:25-29).

If God had promised in advance that all Jews would be saved and had then failed to save some of them, God would indeed have failed. But no one can claim failure on God's part if, as is the case, he foretold in advance that precisely what has happened would happen, namely, that many Jews would not believe and would be scattered and that, in their place, many of the scattered Gentiles would be gathered to Christ. As with the previous point, Paul proves his argument by citing Old Testament texts, in this case Hosea 2:23, Hosea 1:10, Isaiah 10:22-23, and Isaiah 1:9.

Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea,
only the remnant will be saved.

Romans 9:27; cf. Isaiah 10:22

Hosea 2:23, which Paul applies to God's calling of the Gentiles to be a new spiritual people, articulates the other half of the argument.

I will call them "my people" who are not my people; and I will call her "my loved one"
who is not my loved one.

Romans 9:25; cf. Hosea 2:23

3. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *the failure of the Jews to believe was their own fault, not God's* (Rom. 9:30-10:21).

Why did the Jews fail to believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior? Paul answers that it was because of the way they went about trying to earn their salvation themselves. The way of salvation, as he has shown in Romans 4 from a careful examination of key Old Testament passages, is by faith in God's provision in Christ. Abraham, David, and all the other Old Testament figures who were saved were saved through believing God. But this is precisely what the Jews of

Paul's day would not do. They wanted to be approved by God on the basis of their own good deeds and righteousness, and, as a result, they would not submit to the righteousness of God that is received by faith.

Of course, this is also precisely why most Gentiles are not saved. They are self-righteous, which means that they think they deserve salvation and do not need grace. They do not understand the depth or horror of sin, which contaminates even the best of their imagined good works.

4. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *some Jews (Paul himself was an example) have believed and have been saved* (Rom. 11:1).

Paul makes this point in one verse, asking, "Did God reject his people?" He answers, "By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin." As long as even one Jewish person has been saved, no one can claim that God has rejected his people utterly. But, in fact, the situation is not as grim as that scenario. On the contrary, as the next section shows, even in the worst times God has preserved a considerable remnant of the Jewish people.

5. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *it has always been the case that not all Jews but only a remnant has been saved* (Rom. 11:2-10).

Paul's proof here is God's speech to Elijah after Elijah had achieved his victory over the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel, had fled exhausted to the wilderness and there, profoundly depressed and discouraged, had pleaded for death on the grounds that of all those who had been faithful to God only he was left, and it would be only a short time before King Ahab and Queen Jezebel discovered his hiding place and killed him, too. God replied that Elijah was only feeling sorry for himself, because, as a matter of fact, God still had seven thousand Israelites who had not abandoned the true faith in order to worship Baal.

The point God was trying to bring out for Elijah's benefit was that there was still a large number of believing Jews in Israel, seven thousand to be exact. Paul's point is that although there were only seven thousand, a

small portion of the nation, this was still a sufficiently large number to diffuse the claim of anyone who might suppose that God had failed.

6. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *the salvation of the Gentiles, which is now occurring, is meant to arouse Israel to envy and thus be the means of saving some of them* (Rom. 11:11-24).

The argument Paul develops in these middle verses of the eleventh chapter is one of the most profound in the Bible. This is because in it Paul is trying to explain why God has acted as he has. We can understand that God has a *right* to do anything he wants, particularly with sinners who have only opposed him. He can save whom he wants, since salvation is by grace. He can condemn whom he wants, since this is justice. But, still, rejection seems rather harsh treatment of his ancient and formerly "chosen people." Is God merely writing them off? Paul's answer is that this is not the case. Rather, God is using the day of Gentile salvation for the good of Israel, since it is through God's work among the Gentiles that Israel is being stirred from her selfrighteousness, self-complacency, and lethargy, as a result of which some are being saved.

Israel has indeed been rejected for a time, like branches being broken from an olive tree. But Paul turns this back on the Gentiles, warning them that although they have been brought into the covenant people in place of those numerous Jews who have been left out, they are not to think that they are beyond danger nationally. For if God has broken the Jewish branches from their own tree, what is to keep him from cutting off the ingrafted Gentile branches and then bringing the Jewish branches back again?

As a matter of fact, this is exactly what has happened to many Gentile nations. At one time there was a strong Christian church in North Africa, but it has been almost entirely destroyed. Formerly strong churches in Germany, France, England, and other countries have

likewise ceased to thrive. No one must ever presume upon the grace of God.

7. Finally, God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *in the end all Israel will be saved, and thus God will fulfill his promises to Israel nationally* (Rom. 11:2532).

This last point has proved extremely controversial in the history of the exposition of Romans 911, because there are many who feel that a future day of national blessing for Israel would mean a regression in God's plan of redemption. The argument, a strong one, is theological. It is that the promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Christ and unfolded in the church. Therefore, it is inconceivable that God could again deal nationally with Israel.

I acknowledge that there may be aspects of prophetic interpretation that have over-literalized the day of future Jewish blessing. I am not willing to argue that the fulfillment of this promise necessarily means the reestablishment of a believing Jewish state, the state of Israel, though it seems to me that this is probably the case and may even be in the process of happening. I am not willing to argue for a necessary rebuilding of the temple, particularly if it should become a place where blood sacrifices for sin would be offered. I am willing to discuss many details of the coming endtimes, which seem to include a seven-year period of great suffering and tribulation, a great final worldwide battle known as Armageddon, a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, and other things. I think many of these matters are debatable. But I do not see why a future day of national Jewish blessing is or should be debatable, since that is what Paul clearly says will happen: "And so all Israel will be saved..." (v. 26).

To say that this only means true Israel, or the church, seems to me to be an evasion of Paul's obvious teaching. True, this does not mean that every individual Jew who has ever lived will be saved, or even that every Jew living in the final days will be saved necessarily. But it must refer to some great time of national repentance and salvation. For, "as it is written:

'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'"

Romans 11:26-27

It is no wonder that at this point, having moved from the distress of the opening of chapter 9—"I have great sorrow and increasing anguish in my heart" for Israel—to the expectation of a glorious future deliverance of that people, Paul should turn to doxology and end the section with a hymn of praise to God for his wisdom.

We are going to be studying all these points in detail as we move through these great but sadly neglected chapters of Romans. Yet even here it is possible to see something of the vast scope of Paul's plan. The apostle is showing what God is doing in the flow of human history from the very earliest moments in which he began to save our fallen race, through the period in which he began to work in a special way through the nation of Israel, to the coming of the Messiah, the rejection of Jesus for the most part by his own people, the offer of the gospel to the Gentiles, and the eventual conversion of the masses of Israel so that the two great religious portions of the human race may be saved and joined together as one people in him. And, in all this, Paul is providing what theologians call a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God to human beings. In other words, he is not only showing what God is doing but also that he is right in so operating.

Fitting In

What I have just talked about is what God is doing in history. And the question before us, as we begin this section, is: "How do we fit in?" What is God doing with your life? If you are a Christian, he is forming Jesus Christ in you so that at the end of time there will be a vast host of believers who will stand before him as sisters and brothers of his beloved Son.

Our problem is that we forget that this is what God is doing. Or we do not think about this enough for it to matter. Instead, we are caught up in our own little plans, most of which have nothing to do with this purpose and will prove meaningless in the end. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you must know that you are here to be like Christ and to strive to win others to Christ, so that they as well as yourself might have a share in this great blessing. What is God doing in history? *That* is what he is doing. *That* is a true understanding of historical events.

Chapter 123.
Great Sorrow for a Great People

Romans 9:1-4

It is difficult for any of us to receive a hard truth, however necessary it may be to hear it. But there is always a much better chance of hearing it if it is told to us in love.

In the second volume of his study of Romans, Ray Stedman tells of a congregation that had dismissed its pastor. Someone asked a parishioner why they had done it.

"The pastor kept telling us we were going to hell," the church member answered.

"What does your new pastor say?"

"He keeps saying we're going to hell, too."

"So what's the difference?"

"Well," the churchgoer replied, "when our first pastor said we were going to hell, he sounded like he was glad. But when our new pastor says it, he sounds like it is breaking his heart." This is what is going on as we begin the ninth chapter of Romans.

We recall that at the end of chapter eight, Paul was riding an emotional high as he declared that there is nothing in all creation that can separate a believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We read that, and our souls, too, thrill to the ecstasy. But suddenly we come to chapter 9, and we find Paul exclaiming in a very different mood: "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (vv. 1-2). What has happened? The answer is that he is now suddenly thinking of the members of his own race, the Jewish people, and he is grieving because for the most part they have rejected the gospel of God's grace in Christ that he has been expounding.

Paul is in such anguish for them that he could wish—these are his very words—"that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (vv. 3-4a).

An Enemy for Christ's Sake

This would be an unacceptable and nearly incomprehensible claim to most Jews who might hear him, for in their sight Paul was the worst of all possible enemies. He was a Jew himself, first of all. But he had become a believer in the one they would have called "that blaspheming imposter," and now he was going about trying to convert both Gentiles and Jews to this religion. From their perspective, Paul was not only dreadfully wrong; he was also a traitor, a man who was trying to destroy the Judaism he had once affirmed.

Paul was not doing that, of course, at least not according to his understanding of the prophets. He was proclaiming Jesus as Israel's true Messiah. But he was aware of the enmity that existed, which is why he is so anxious to declare his love for his people in this chapter.

The important thing in terms of Paul's own statement is not that the Jews perceived him to be their enemy, but that they were enemies of his, having set out to harass, hinder, and defeat him in everyway possible. As Paul traveled about the Roman world he had considerable success in gathering congregations of Gentiles to his message. He

established churches everywhere. But wherever he did this, Jews stirred up mobs, which frequently drove him from those cities. And sometimes, after Paul had left a particular Gentile area, they sent teachers to subvert the newly established churches.

Later in his life, after he had returned to Jerusalem to try to bridge the widening gulf between the Jewish and Gentile churches and win more of the Jews to Christ, more than forty extremely zealous Jews bound themselves with an oath that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed him (Acts 23:12-13).

But notice: The truly remarkable thing is *not* that the Jews hated Paul. That was natural, given what each believed and what each was trying to accomplish. The remarkable thing was Paul's overwhelming love for those who were his enemies. He tells us in one place, "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one," adding that he was in constant "danger from my own countrymen" (2 Cor. 11:24, 26). Yet nowhere in his writings or anywhere else is there ever found (or is there ever imputed to him) the shadow of personal offense, matching retaliation, or lingering bitterness against the Jews for this abuse. Not once. Nowhere.

On the contrary, Paul's spirit was the spirit of his Master, who wept over the city of Jerusalem even though he knew he was about to be crucified by the nation's hostile leaders.

Jesus said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.... They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" (Luke 19:41-44).

It was the tragic contrast between the Jews' fierce unbelief and the joys of the gospel that brought tears to the eyes of both Jesus of Nazareth and the apostle Paul.

Cut Off from Christ

But we have not fully sounded the depths of Paul's great love and sorrow for his people even yet. For the fully remarkable thing is not merely his love for those who hated him—remarkable as that is—but what he actually says in this passage. He says that he could wish himself "cut off from Christ" for the sake of his Jewish brothers. Strictly speaking, the words *cut off* are not in the original text, though they convey the right idea. The text actually says that Paul would be willing to be "accursed from Christ" (that is, "damned") for the sake of the Jewish people.

Now that really is remarkable!

"Cut off from Christ"? From the very man who has reveled far beyond any of the other New Testament writers on the glories of being *in Christ* or being *joined to him?*

"Accursed"? From the very teacher who has so passionately affirmed that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?

The presence of these astonishing words on Paul's lips has caused more than one commentator to try to understand them in some way other than what is obviously the sense, with a few suggesting that Paul was only speaking of what he had once thought of himself and Christ before becoming a Christian. But that will not do at all, as almost everyone recognizes. It is true that Paul knows he cannot actually be separated from Christ. That is what the previous chapter has proclaimed so forcefully. Paul's words in chapter 9 are only hypothetical. But they are genuine nevertheless. For he is saying that, if it *were* possible, he *could* wish himself accursed from Christ if only his condemnation could achieve the salvation of the people he so fervently loved.

The Example of Moses

Paul was a careful student of the Old Testament, of course. So although he does not say so explicitly, it is hard to imagine that he wrote these

words without thinking of a similar statement made by Moses, the great lawgiver of Israel. In fact, Paul is probably deliberately echoing Moses' words in order to identify with Moses and thus add credibility to his own statement.

Moses' words occur in Exodus 32, in the context of one of the greatest stories in the Old Testament.

After their deliverance from Egypt, God had led the people of Israel to Mount Sinai, where Moses was called up into the mountain to receive the law. He was there for forty days. As the days stretched into weeks, the people who were waiting below grew restless and eventually prevailed on Moses' brother, Aaron, to make a substitute god for them. Aaron should have resisted indignantly. But Aaron was weak, as many prominent people are. So he asked for the people's gold, and when he had it he found that he had enough to make a little calf. The people had probably been thinking in terms of Apis, the great bull-god they had known in Egypt. They wanted a bull. But a calf was good enough, so they had a great celebration and orgy to mark their new allegiance to this god. As they danced around the idolatrous golden calf, they exclaimed, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exod. 32:4).

Moses was up on the mountain and did not know what was going on in the camp. But God did, and God interrupted the giving of the law to tell Moses what was happening.

God said, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves as idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt'" (vv. 7-8).

It was a painfully ironic situation. God had just given the people the Ten Commandments, which begin: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other

gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:2-6).

But, while God had been giving these commands, the people whom he had freed from slavery were doing precisely what he was prohibiting. They were even ascribing their liberation to the idol. Besides, their idolatrous celebration was undoubtedly leading to transgressions of each of the other commandments, too. They were dishonoring their parents, committing adultery, coveting, and probably doing many other evil things.

God said, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exod. 32:10).

Instead, Moses interceded for the people, saying, "Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt...?" (v. 11). If the situation were not so grim, the words would be funny, because God had just spoken to Moses of "your people" and here Moses was speaking to God of *"your* people." It was as if neither wanted to be identified with the nation in its rebellious state.

Moses pleaded two arguments. First: "What will the Egyptians say if you destroy them? They will say, 'You brought them into the desert with evil intent, only to do them harm.'" Second: "What about your covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? You promised to make their descendants numerous and to be their inheritance forever. You cannot break your covenant" (see vv. 12-13).

God heard, and the judgment was at least momentarily restrained.

Now Moses started down the mountain to deal with the people as best he knew how. First, Moses destroyed the golden calf. He burned it in

the fire, ground it up, mixed it with water, and made the people drink it. Next, he rebuked Aaron publicly. This was the best he could do in Aaron's case, since Aaron had been anointed to the post of high priest by God. Finally, Moses called any who still remained on God's side to separate themselves from the others and stand by him. The tribe of Levi responded. At Moses' command, these were sent through the camp to execute those who had led the rebellion. About three thousand men died, that is, about one-half of one percent of the 600,000 who had left Egypt at the exodus.

From a human point of view, Moses had dealt with the sin. Aaron was rebuked, the leaders were punished, and the loyalty of the people was at least temporarily reclaimed. All seemed to be well.

But Moses did not only have a leader's relationship to the people. He also represented the people to God, and God still waited in wrath upon the mountain. What was Moses to do? For theologians writing in our day, the wrath of God may be no more than an interesting and (as some assume) outmoded concept. But not for Moses. He had been talking with God. He had received God's commandments. He had heard God say, "You shall have no other gods before me," and "[I will punish] the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." Who was he to think that the merely human measures he had taken would satisfy the righteous demands of such a holy God?

The night passed. The morning came, and Moses was to reascend the mountain. He had been thinking. Sometime during the night, a way that might possibly divert the wrath of God against the people had come to him. He had remembered the sacrifices of the Hebrew patriarchs and the newly instituted sacrifice of the Passover. God had shown by such sacrifices that he was prepared to accept an innocent substitute in place of the just death of the sinner. His wrath could sometimes fall on another.

Moses pondered, "Perhaps...." And then the great man turned to the mountain with determination.

Reaching the top, he began to speak to God. Moses must have been in deep anguish, an anguish almost matched by the apostle Paul's in our Romans passage, for the Hebrew text is uneven, and Moses' second sentence breaks off without ending, indicated by a dash in the middle of Exodus 32:32. It was a strangled cry, a sob welling up from the heart of a man who is asking to be sent to hell if his condemnation could mean the salvation of the people he loved.

The text says, "So Moses went back to the LORD and said 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin— [that is the point at which the sentence abruptly breaks off] but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.'"

On the preceding day, before Moses had come down from the mountain to the camp, God had said something that could have been a temptation to a lesser man. If Moses would agree, God said, he would destroy the people for their sin and then begin to make a new Jewish nation from Moses (Exod. 32:10). Moses would become a new Abraham. Even then, Moses had rejected the offer, pleading for the people instead. But after he had been with them and had realized again how much he loved them, in spite of their stiff-necked rebellion and sin, his answer, still negative, rises to even greater heights.

God had said, "I will destroy them and made a great nation of you."

Moses replied, "No, rather destroy me and save them."

Moses lived in a relatively early stage of God's dealings with his people and probably did not know, as we know, that what he had prayed for could not be. Moses offered to give himself for his people to save them. But Moses could not save even himself, let alone them. He, too, was a sinner. On one occasion he had even committed murder. He could not be a substitute for his people. He could not die for them.

But there was one who could. Thus, "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). This was the only adequate substitute for sinners, the Son of God himself. And Jesus' future, yet foreseen death was the reason God did not destroy the people then and why he does not destroy people who believe on Jesus Christ today. Paul knew this, which is why he speaks hypothetically and not exactly as Moses did, though he echoes his words. He knew that Jesus died to receive the full outpouring of God's wrath against sin so that those who come to God through faith in him might not experience God's just wrath but rather grace. He knew it was the only way God saves anyone.

Let This Mind Be in You

The spirit that was in Jesus, Paul, and Moses should be in each of us—if we would be soulwinners. No one can die for another person's salvation. Jesus is the only one who could, and he did. But we can love as he loved, and we can point others to him.

Let me close this study with five thought-provoking questions.

1. *Do you anguish over others?* Do you sorrow for those who do not know Jesus Christ and who are therefore perishing without him? I am afraid that most of us do not. Why is that? Is it because we do not believe that they are perishing? Because we do not believe the gospel? Probably it is because we are not very much like Jesus Christ, do not spend much time with him, and do not think of spiritual things much at all.

2. *Do you anguish over those closest to you, the members of your own family?* Paul also grieved over the Gentiles, but the verses we have been studying deal with his own people and with his personal, special sorrow over them. If we were like him, husbands would grieve over unsaved wives, wives over unsaved husbands, parents over children, and children over parents. We would grieve for members of our extended families and for our neighborhoods.

Charles Spurgeon knew a story that is like this. A girl who was not in good health approached her pastor with thoughts about her coming funeral. She spoke of her father, who was an unbeliever and who had never accepted an invitation from her to go to church. "Pastor, you will bury me, won't you?" she asked. "My father will have to come to my funeral and hear you speak, and you will speak the gospel. Please speak it clearly. I have prayed for him a long time. I know God will save him." According to Spurgeon, the father came to her funeral and was converted. The girl did not die in her father's place, as Jesus died for us. But she had the spirit of Christ in that she was willing to die if her death might cause the conversion of one close to her whom she very much loved.

3. *Do you anguish over those who are your enemies?* Paul's sorrow was for those who were his avowed enemies. If you have enemies, you are to love them. In fact, you are to love most those who treat you worst. God loved us while we were "enemies" (Rom. 5:10). How are we to win others unless we love even our enemies in this way?

4. *Do you anguish over those who are great sinners?* The nation for whom Paul grieved was composed of great sinners, for they had rejected the love of God in Christ Jesus. Do you similarly grieve for sinners? If you do not, is it because you do not really consider yourself to be one of them?

5. *Do you anguish over those who have great privileges?* Finally, as the verses we are studying will go on to show, the Jews of Paul's day also possessed great privileges. So we are led to ask ourselves: "Do I anguish over those who are favored spiritually and in other ways, as well as over those who are openly sinners, downtrodden and unfortunate?" Those who are privileged need the gospel, too.

Paul was a great preacher of election. He will preach it again even in these verses. But his knowledge of the need for the electing grace of God in salvation did not prohibit him from sorrowing over those who were lost. I commend the heart of the great apostle to you. Let the sins

of others grieve you. Let the fate that hangs over them like the sword of Damocles be often on your mind. For, if it is, you will work for their salvation in exactly the same proportion, and you will speak often of Jesus who actually was accursed for those who should afterward believe on him.

Chapter 124.
Great Advantages for a Great People

Romans 9:4-5

There is little doubt that the opening verses of Romans 9 reveal an intense love on the part of the apostle Paul for those of his own race and nation. He has been eloquent at other places in this letter. But nowhere has he spoken with such depth of feeling as he does here, saying that he would be willing to be "cursed and cut off from Christ" if his damnation could mean the salvation of those of his own race, whom he loves.

This is a wonderful sentiment, of course. But if Paul had said nothing more than this, it might be possible for us to dismiss his words as a mere chauvinistic boast, which might well be very wrong or even sinful. We know of people who have great pride in their nation, even when their nation has not been worthy of that pride or has embarked on some terrible course of action.

"*Gott mit uns*," said the Germans during World War II.

"My country, right or wrong," say countless others.

This is not what Paul is saying, however. So immediately after having expressed his great love for his people, he writes two sentences that explain the genuine and admirable advantages they possess. "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."

In this chapter Paul is going to say that salvation is of God's grace entirely. But before he does, he reminds us that there are nevertheless very great advantages even to the outward forms of God's revealed religion.

The Advantages of Earthly Israel

There is a well-known story about Benjamin Disraeli, the conservative statesman who served as prime minister of England in 1868 and from 1874 to 1880. He was elected to Parliament at the age of thirty-three and shortly thereafter was attacked by Daniel O'Connell, the Irish Roman Catholic leader. In the course of his unrestrained invective, O'Connell referred to Disraeli's Jewish ancestry. Disraeli replied, "Yes, sir, I am a Jew. And I remind my illustrious opponent that when the ancestors of that right honorable gentleman were brutal savages eating nuts in a German forest, my ancestors were serving as priests in the temple of Solomon and were giving law and religion to the world."

Advantages? Indeed! It is those very real advantages that Paul points out in the verses we are to study. There are eight in all.

1. *The adoption as sons.* This is the only place in the New Testament where adoption is used of Israel. Normally it is used of believers in Jesus Christ, which is how Paul has used it thus far in Romans (Rom. 8:15, 23). When it is used of believers it refers to their new status before God as his spiritual sons and daughters resulting from redemption and the new birth. When it is used of Israel, as here, it refers to God's selection of the Jews as an elect nation through which he would bring salvation to the world.

The following terms spell out what this means. It means that Israel alone received the glory, the covenants, the law, the directions for the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and at the end, it was from this people that the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, came.

2. *The divine glory.* The word *glory* is not explained and could mean several things. It could be an adjective linked to adoption with the sense of "the glorious adoption." It could mean the glory of being God's special people. However, most commentators recognize that in the Old Testament "glory" usually refers to the visible symbol of the presence of God described by later Judaism as the Shekinah, and that this is what "glory" probably refers to here.

This visible symbol of God's presence seems to have taken a variety of forms. It appeared first at the time of the exodus from Egypt, when it was a great cloud separating the fleeing nation from the pursuing Egyptians. This cloud guided them during the years of their desert wandering, protecting them from the sun by day and turning into a pillar of fire by night to give both light and warmth to their encampment. Later the glory descended on Mount Sinai as a dark cloud accompanied by thunder and lightning when the law was given to Moses (Exod. 24:16-17). Later it filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38) and rested over the Ark of the Covenant within the Most Holy Place. Still later it settled down as an intense light above the Mercy Seat of the Ark between the wings of the cherubim (Lev. 16:2). From there, in the time of Ezekiel, it departed and returned to heaven in response to the escalating sins of the people (Ezek. 10; 11).

John Murray wrote, "This glory was the sign of God's presence with Israel and certified to Israel that God dwelt among them and met with them."

3. *The covenants.* Nothing is more characteristic of God's special relationship with the people than the covenants. The word is so rich that it is used in a wide variety of ways. Here it probably refers to the covenants established by God, first with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then later with Moses and David.

The covenant with Abraham and his immediate descendants, Isaac and Jacob, was made and reinforced on several occasions. The first is in Genesis 12:2-3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

The covenant with Abraham is elaborated in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. It was extended to Jacob at the place he called Bethel (Gen. 28; cf. Exod. 2:24; 6:3-5).

The covenant with the patriarchs was confirmed with the nation of Israel by Moses, as told in Exodus 24.

Finally, God elaborated upon it with David, promising him a descendant who would sit upon his throne forever: "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever... Your throne will be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:12-13, 16; cf. 23:5). The idea of the covenant is so important in the Old Testament that the word appears 253 times in its pages.

4. *The receiving of the law.* One of the chief criticisms of Paul by his Jewish countrymen seems to have been his alleged disregard for the law, since he taught that salvation was by grace through the atoning work of Christ and not by law-keeping. But Paul does not discount the law's value. In fact, he has already affirmed its superlative value in Romans 3, where he first raised the matter of Jewish advantages. "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" he asked. The answer: "Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (vv. 1-2). The phrase "the receiving of the law" means the same thing here.

This extraordinary advantage was possessed by no other nation until the Christian era, when the gospel of God's grace in Christ and the books

that taught it were deliberately taken to the entire world by the apostles and early missionaries in obedience to Christ's express command.

5. *The temple worship.* This phrase refers to the extensive set of regulations for the religious rituals to be practiced first at the tabernacle and then at the temple in Jerusalem. It involves the construction of the temple itself, the laws governing the various sacrifices, and the times of the year for and nature of the specified holy days of Israel. The importance of these things is that they were designed to show the way in which a sinful human being could approach the thrice holy God. God must be approached by means of a blood sacrifice, which testified to the gravity of sin ("the wages of sin is death," Rom. 6:23) and to the way in which an innocent substitute could die in the sinner's place. Eventually all such sacrifices, which were only figures of the ultimate and true sacrifice, were brought to completion and fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

6. *The promises.* The Old Testament is filled with many promises of one sort or another, but in this context "promises" refers to the promises of redemption to be fulfilled by the Messiah, who is Jesus Christ. Paul talks about this at length in Galatians 3.

7. *The patriarchs.* The "patriarchs" are the three fathers of the Jewish nation, namely, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though in a looser sense such distinguished ancestors as Moses and David should also be included. These were all illustrious men to whom God revealed himself in special ways and through whom he worked to call out and bless his ancient people. To have such devout, saintly, and influential men in one's past is rightly regarded by Paul as a significant national distinction of which Jewish people could all justly be proud.

8. *The human ancestry of Christ.* Everything Paul has said to this point would have been soundly echoed by his Jewish opponents, for they, too, regarded all these spiritual advantages highly, though they misunderstood and misused some of them. This is not the case with the last item Paul mentions, for they would have understood

> at once that Paul is referring here to Jesus of Nazareth, and they had no intention of recognizing Jesus as their national Messiah. Yet Paul cannot leave this matter out, if for no other reason than that everything he has mentioned thus far leads up to Jesus.

This is not a random collection of items. There is actually a very close connection between these advantages, according to which each rightly leads to the one following and all lead to Christ. Adoption is the right starting point, for it places the source of salvation in God's electing grace, just as is the case also for believers in Christ. Having chosen to enter into a special relationship with his people, the next step was for God to reveal himself to them in a special way, which is what the word *glory* describes. God has done that for us in Christ, for he is where God's glory must be seen today (John 2:11; 2 Cor. 3:18). When God revealed himself to the people, as he did at Mount Sinai, it was to enter into special covenants or agreements with them, to give them the law by which they were to live, to show the way of salvation through the temple rituals, and to point forward the full realization of their spiritual inheritance when the Messiah should at last be revealed.

The flow of God's actions reaches back to the patriarchs, with which it began, and forward to the coming of Jesus, in whom it culminates (v. 5). These verses are as full and reasoned a statement of the blessings of God to Israel and the spiritual advantages of Old Testament religion as could possibly be given. Israel truly lacked nothing. The nation was enriched with every spiritual blessing and advantage.

Advantages Alone Do Not Save

And yet, the nation as a nation was not saved. It is true that certain Jews were. Paul is going to make that point repeatedly in the following chapters. But nationally—that is, speaking of Israel as a nation—it is nevertheless also true that these great advantages, the greatest spiritual advantages that could possibly be imagined for any people anywhere, did not in themselves guarantee salvation, which is the reason for the great sorrow that Paul has so intensely and poignantly expressed.

In spite of the adoption, in spite of the divine glory, in spite of the covenants, in spite of possessing the law, in spite of the temple worship with its important symbolism, in spite of the promises and the patriarchs—in spite of all these things—no one, not a nation, not an individual, is saved or can be saved apart from Jesus Christ.

This is what Paul himself had experienced. In his letter to the Philippians as well as here in Romans, he reminds us of his experiences in Judaism, saying that he put confidence in these external advantages in his early days. He uses the illustration of an asset and liability statement.

On the asset side he had placed seven items (Phil. 3:5-7).

There were four things that Paul had inherited: "circumcised on the eighth day" (which meant that he was a true Jew and not an Ishmaelite, who would have been circumcised later, or a proselyte, who would be circumcised as an adult), "of the people of Israel" (the covenant name of Israel embraces all the items listed at greater length in Romans), "of the tribe of Benjamin" (the only tribe that remained with Judah in the south at the time of the civil war and was later preserved with Judah, after the fall of the northern kingdom), and "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (that is, born of two Jewish parents).

There were three advantages that Paul has earned for himself. He had become "a Pharisee," the strictest sect of the Jews. He was zealous in his faith, which he proved by his persecution of the early Christian church. "As for legalistic righteousness," he was "faultless." That is, he kept the law as perfectly as he knew how.

What a tremendous set of advantages these were! Yet, when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he discovered at once that they were not enough. He had thought these items added up to salvation, that they made him a righteous person in God's sight. Instead, when he met Jesus and discovered what true righteousness was, he saw that they did not even begin to add up to righteousness, and he realized that, if he was going to be saved, it would have to be by a different means entirely. It

would have to be by the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to him. It would have to be by grace.

And he also learned that the advantages he had thought were spiritual assets were, in fact, not assets. In reality those items were liabilities, for as long as he was trusting them, they were keeping him from Christ. What he had to do was move that entire list over into the column of liabilities, and in the column of assets write "Jesus Christ alone."

Nominal Christians

We must apply this to those who have been brought up in the Christian church and have benefited from its advantages. That may describe you, and if it does, the application of Romans 9:4 and 5 will be obvious. Here it is: Your spiritual advantages, however great they are or may have been, will not save you. You must be born again.

Some people think they are right with God simply because they have had Christian parents, like the Jews who boasted in the patriarchs or Paul, who took confidence from the fact that he was "a Hebrew of Hebrews." To be born into a Christian family and raised by Christian parents is a good thing, not to be despised. But if this has been your experience, you should realize that you will never be saved simply because you have had a believing father or a godly mother. They have imparted advantages to you. But you will not be saved by their lives or their faith. You must believe yourself. You must be following Jesus Christ. You must be born again.

Some people think they are right with God because they have been blessed by a Christian education, either in their home or in a good evangelical Sunday school or in a Christian high school or college. Their education has given them a great deal of sound theology and right answers to many important questions. But no one has ever been saved by head knowledge alone. The devils know more theology than any of us. They have had thousands of years to learn it. Yet they are not saved.

Perhaps you have been trusting in your membership in a Christian church. If you are a member of a sound, believing church, that is a great advantage, corresponding to Israel's adoption as a nation, her possession of the law, the rituals for the temple worship, and the promises. But membership in a church does not save anyone, any more than being a Jew has saved anyone. Today's churches are filled with people who are Christians in name only. There is nothing in their lives to give any indication that they have been touched by Jesus Christ or been drawn to him.

Even the sacraments will not save you, however valuable they are in pointing to the reality of our new life in Christ and the value of constantly feeding on him by faith.

Not long before I wrote this sermon, I was in Memphis, Tennessee, speaking on Christian discipleship, and I met a man who had corresponded with me some years before. He had sent me a book he had written, entitled *Must Jesus Be Lord to Be Savior?* Now he was reminding me of the testimony of his wife, which he had included in the book as an appendix. I remembered it at once because it was so helpful and vivid.

This woman—her name is Paula Webster—had been raised in a Christian home, had been given a Christian education, and was settled down in what seemed to be a Christian marriage. She was active in church, attended Bible conferences, and even had regular times of personal Bible study. She said that if anyone had asked her if she was a Christian, she would have said yes, immediately and emphatically. Yet something was missing. She knew about God, but she sensed that she did not actually know him. She felt frustrated and unhappy, and as far as her own spiritual life was concerned she knew she was getting nowhere.

As she studied the Bible she was particularly attracted to David and Paul, because each clearly had a heart for God. They knew about God. But in addition they each loved him and wanted to obey him as an expression of that love. As she studied their lives she realized that something was wrong with her own heart and asked God to change her.

God did! He taught her that she had never actually given herself to him and that the surrender of herself was necessary. She needed to become Jesus' genuine disciple.

Here, in her own words, is what happened: "At the moment I surrendered my life entirely to God, I knew that he had heard me and had accepted my surrender. I was conscious immediately that a great burden had been rolled away. I knew that I had been forgiven and cleansed. I knew that I had been changed. Peace, like a great calm following a storm at sea, and joy unspeakable filled my heart. I knew that the great war within had ceased. The sense that all had been made right replaced the agitation and restlessness I had felt only minutes before. I had finally been subdued and conquered by the Lord of Glory before whom I now gladly and gratefully bowed. And he no longer seemed distant or impersonal, nor I unclean and unsure before him.... I had been born again."

She confessed that her earlier faith had been a dead faith only, an intellectual acceptance of facts relating to Jesus, and that the advantages she had received in a Christian environment had not changed her heart.

I am sure that describes many hundreds of people who will read this study in book form. How am I sure? It is because there is so much nominal Christianity. You may be such a Christian, and if that is the case, this testimony should move you. Have you had spiritual advantages? If you have had them, thank God. But do not trust in those advantages. Seek God himself, and do not rest until you can say that the burden of your sin has been rolled away and that you are truly a new creature in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 125.
Jesus, Who Is God

Romans 9:5

The opening paragraph of Romans 9 lists the extraordinary privileges and advantages of the Jews, God's ancient people. In the words of Paul, they have been given "the adoption as sons... the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship... the promises [and]... the patriarchs." But to this extraordinary list of privileges Paul now adds the greatest privilege of all, namely, that they are those through whom the Redeemer of the human race has come.

"... from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!
Amen."

This is a very striking statement. For Paul is not only saying that the Messiah was born of Israel, that is, that he was a Jew. He is also saying that this Jewish Messiah, born of Israel according to the flesh, is, in fact, God. And he is saying it in stark language. If we substitute the name Jesus for Christ, which we can do, since Paul is obviously writing about Jesus, we have the statement: "Jesus, who is God over all, forever praised!" Or, to simplify it even further, "Jesus... is God over all." The sentence means that Jesus is himself the only and most high God. **A**

Hotly Disputed Text

This is so extreme a statement—and, as some would say, a statement so uncharacteristic of the New Testament writers—that from the time of the Reformation forward numerous commentators and Bible teachers have attempted to understand it differently. This has made Romans 9:5 one of the most hotly disputed texts of the New Testament.

Basically, there are two main interpretations of this verse. The first is what we have in the New
International Version: "Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!" This is what most other English versions of the New Testament also say essentially, and it is how nearly all the ancient writers also understood it.

The second interpretation is based on the fact that there are almost no marks of punctuation in the Greek texts of the New Testament and that the phrase may therefore, at least in theory, be broken up. This was proposed first by the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was a contemporary of Martin Luther. According to this interpretation, a period should be added to the verse, either after the word *flesh* (which follows "Christ" in the Greek text) or after the words *over all.*

In the first case the sentence would read, "... from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ. God who is over all be forever praised!"

In the second case the translation would be: "... from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is over all. God be forever praised!" Each of these is essentially one interpretation, since each is designed to avoid calling Jesus "God" explicitly. These alternate translations are indicated in the footnote to the New International Version.

What should we say about this contested passage? The first thing we must say is that almost all arguments, especially grammatical arguments, favor the translation that calls Jesus "God" explicitly. Here are a few:

1. *The word order favors it.* In the Greek language, as in most other languages, including English, the relative pronoun follows the noun to which it refers. In this text the order of nouns and pronouns is: *Christ, who,* and *God.* "Who" should refer to Christ, which is the noun that comes immediately before, and the meaning should be "Christ, who is... God." To make the verse mean "God, who..."violates the word order. Of course, the period could be placed after the relative clause, which would solve the word order problem ("Christ, who is over all. God be forever praised!"). But in that case, the translation has the following difficulty.
2. *A doxology should begin with the word* blessed. The proper form for a doxology is "Blessed be God [or some person]...." But in order to separate God from Christ, which this interpretation tries to do, the order would be "God," followed by "blessed."

3. *A doxology is out of place in this passage.* It is appropriate to praise God in a passage that speaks of some great spiritual achievement or triumph, as Paul does at the end of Romans 11, for example. But why should God be praised here, in a passage in which Paul has been expressing acute personal sorrow for the Jews' rejection of Jesus? In Romans 11, quite differently, the doxology comes after Paul has explained that in spite of the overall rejection of God by Israel, God is nevertheless going to save the mass of the nation one day.

4. *The reference to Christ being "after the flesh" requires a phrase pointing to his deity.* We have this in Romans 1, where Paul writes of Jesus, "who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (vv. 3-4). If Jesus is not identified as God in Romans 9:5, the antithesis is lacking.

Affirmations of Christ's Deity

The one powerful argument for the interpretation that separates the words *Christ* and *God* by a period is that, according to its proponents, Paul nowhere else explicitly calls Jesus "God." This seems to have carried weight with the translators of the New International Version, since it is the only reason why they would have placed the alternative translations, which I mentioned above, in the footnote.

We have to admit at this point that there is an obvious reticence among the New Testament writers to say starkly that "Jesus is God." And for good reason. Without explanation, a statement like this might be understood as teaching that God left heaven in order to come to earth in the person of the human Jesus, leaving heaven without his presence. Each of the New Testament writers knew that this is not an accurate picture. Each was aware of the doctrine of the Trinity, according to which God is described as being one God but existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since Jesus is the Son of God, it was

customary for them to call him that, rather than simply "God," reserving the unembellished word God for *God* the Father.

This is why Jesus is not often called God explicitly.

Yet, although it is unusual to find Jesus called God for the reasons just given, it is not the case that he is never called God.

We think of the Gospel of John, for instance. At the very beginning of that Gospel, John writes: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God.* He was with God in the beginning" (vv. 1-2, emphasis added). A bit later "the Word" is identified as Jesus (v. 14), so the text says that Jesus is God. True, the verses are written so as to distinguish the persons of the Father and Son within the Trinity. But they nevertheless identify Jesus as God explicitly.

Later in John's Gospel we find the same thing in Thomas's great confession, which is the Gospel's spiritual climax. "Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" John 20:28).

Acts 20:28 is another relevant passage. Here Paul is speaking to elders of the church at Ephesus, telling them to, "be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." The blood that was the price of our redemption is the blood of Christ, but here it is called the blood of God. The only way Paul could make this identification is by thinking of Christ as being God so directly and naturally that what he posits of one can without any violence also be said of the other.

Hebrews 1:8 calls Jesus "God" by applying Psalm 45:6-7 to him: "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever...."

The best example of an identification of Jesus with God in Paul's writings, apart from our text, is Titus 2:13-14, where Paul writes, "We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...." Apart from the context, the words *God and Savior* could mean only "God the Father and God the Son." But since Paul is writing of the second coming and sudden appearance of Jesus,

both words must refer to him, for it is not God the Father who is going to appear suddenly but rather "our great God and Savior," who is Jesus.

So it is not true that Paul never identifies Jesus with God explicitly. He does, as do other New Testament writers, in spite of the reticence and care with which they usually write. However, even if it *were* the case that Paul nowhere else explicitly identifies Jesus as God, that fact alone does not prove that he cannot do it here—which, in fact, he does.

I like what John Calvin says of the attempt to separate God from Christ by splitting up the text in the way I have described. He writes wisely, "To separate this clause from the rest of the context for the purpose of depriving Christ of this clear witness to his divinity is an audacious attempt to create darkness where there is full light."

Even better is the judgment of Robert Haldane: "The Scriptures have many real difficulties, which are calculated to try or to increase the faith and patience of the Christian, and are evidently designed to enlarge his acquaintance with the Word of God by obliging him more diligently to search into them [sic] and place his dependence on the Spirit of truth. But when language so clear as in the present passage is perverted to avoid recognizing the obvious truth contained in the divine testimony, it more fully manifests the depravity of human nature and the rooted enmity of the carnal mind against God, than the grossest works of the flesh."

Like many other commentators and Bible teachers, I find Romans 9:5 to be one of the most sublime testimonies to the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ in all the Bible.

The Teaching of the Passage

Yet this is not all the passage teaches. It actually contains four very important teachings, including Jesus' deity.

1. *The humanity of Jesus.* The first heresy in church history was the denial of the true humanity of Christ. It was called docetism, from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means "to seem." It taught that Jesus only

seemed to be a man. In some forms it taught that the Spirit of Christ came upon the man Jesus at the time of his baptism by John, but that it left him just before the crucifixion, since it was not possible for God to die, according to Greek thinking. There is none of this in the New Testament. For here in Romans 9:5, as in many other passages, the biblical writers are united in their insistence that Jesus was a true human being, a descendant of Abraham according to the flesh.

This has a number of important implications, for it means that God not only fully understands but has also himself likewise experienced all that we experience as human beings.

Do we hunger? Jesus hungered many times, specifically when he was in the wilderness being tempted of the devil.

Do we experience thirst? Jesus thirsted on the cross.

Do we experience rejection and misunderstanding by friends, hostility from enemies, pain, suffering, and even death? So did Jesus, and in a form and with an intensity far greater than anything we might experience.

Even more important perhaps, Jesus experienced temptation just as we do, so that he might be a helper to us when we go through it. The Book of Hebrews says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

The doctrine of Christ's humanity is of great importance for us if we are to live a victorious Christian life.

2. *The deity of Jesus.* As I have said, the earliest heresy in the history of the church was the denial of Christ's humanity. But today the case is the exact opposite. Few would deny his humanity, since to our way of thinking Jesus was obviously a man, even an exemplary man. We do not deny this. Instead there are strong, numerous, and popular attempts to deny his deity. Countless numbers of our contemporaries regard Jesus as having been nothing but a man.

Far more is lost with this denial than in denying Christ's humanity. What is lost is the value of his atonement for sin, for no mere man, however good, would be able to pay the infinite price required for our redemption. In the Middle Ages there was a great English scholar named Anselm who saw this clearly and wrote about it in a book that has become a classic. It is called
Cur Deus Homo?, which means "Why the God Man?" or, more naturally, "Why Did God Become Man?" Anselm answered that God became man in Christ because only one who was both God and man could achieve our salvation.

Here is his classic statement of this truth: "It would not have been right for the restoration of human nature to be left undone, and... it could not have been done unless man paid what was owing to God for sin. But the debt was so great that, while man alone owed it, only God could pay it, so that the same person must be both man and God. Thus it was necessary for God to take manhood into the unity of his Person, so that he who in his own nature ought to pay and could not should be in a person who could.... The life of this one man was so sublime, so precious, that it can suffice to pay what is owing for the sins of the whole world, and infinitely more."

This combination of Christ's humanity and deity, and the reason for it, makes Calvary the very center of the Christian faith. It is the reason the Son of God came to earth. There is no gospel without it.

3. *The supremacy of Jesus.* But Jesus did not only die, humbling himself for our salvation. He also rose again and has now ascended to heaven, where he is honored as God, having being given the name that is above every name, even the name of God (Jehovah) himself. This is Paul's teaching in Philippians 2, where he writes of Jesus:

> *And being found in appearance as a man, he*
> *humbled himself and became obedient to*
> *death— even death on a cross!*
> *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place*
> *and gave him the name that is above every*

name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:8-11

If Jesus Christ is Lord, as these passages say he is, the supremacy of Christ described in Romans 9:5 ("who is God over all") includes his rule over us, who are his people, and we are not his people if we fail to submit to that rule.

There is a great deal of bad thinking and even error in this area at the present time. It has become customary in some places to think of Christianity as a two-stage commitment. In the first stage we come to Jesus as Savior, simply believing on him as the one who died for sin. In the second we come to him as Lord, thereby becoming serious about our Christianity and about being Christ's disciples. But nothing like that is found in the New Testament. On the contrary, to become a Christian is to become a disciple and vice versa. In fact, that is the way Jesus himself spoke of evangelism in the Great Commission, since he sent his disciples to "*make disciples* of all nations" (Matt. 28:19, emphasis mine). Submitting to Christ's lordship is the very essence of true faith, or Christianity.

4. *The rightness of praising Jesus.* The fourth doctrine taught in Romans 9:5 is the rightness of praising Jesus, for the text reads, "Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!" It raises two questions: "Do we praise him?" and "Do we praise him as we should?"

The answer to the second question is obviously no, for no mere human or earthly words can be adequate for praising Christ properly. Yet we should do it, knowing that it will be our privilege, joy, and glory to praise Jesus Christ in heaven forever. The angels are doing it. They sing:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!

Revelation 5:12

According to Revelation, one day we are going to join with them, crying,
To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!

Revelation 5:13

So let's do it now! Let us praise our Savior, who is God over all, as best we know how—and live for him until he comes again.

The Greatest Tragedy

I have one last thought as I return to the paragraph in Romans from which our text is taken. We have seen that Paul is expressing sorrow over the fact that the ancient nation of Israel had as a whole rejected Jesus and that, in that context, the ascription of deity to Jesus is appropriate as conveying the full tragedy of the Jews' rejection. It is bad enough that the nation should have missed the full value of the other privileges listed: the adoption, the divine glory, the covenants, the law, the temple worship, the promises, and the patriarchs. But it is a tragedy beyond description that they should have rejected Jesus as the Messiah whom God had promised.

Yet we also need to say more. However tragic the Jews' rejection of Jesus may have been (and is), the rejection of Jesus by others, both Jews and Gentiles, is equally tragic today, perhaps even more so, since the gospel has been so widely proclaimed and been so amply defended in the many centuries of subsequent church history.

It would be especially tragic if you yourself should reject him, either forcefully ("I will not have this man to rule over me") or by neglect ("Speak to me about it again, some other time"). If you are doing either

of those two things, how can we who know Jesus have anything other than "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in our hearts for you? To reject our words is nothing, but to reject *him* is a loss of cosmic proportions. So we say, "Do not reject him. Believe on him."

God is making his appeal through us as we say with Paul, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20) and remind you that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21). That is the gospel. Do not allow the opportunity to respond to that wonderful message pass you by.

Part Twelve: The Justification of God

Chapter 126.
True Israel

Romans 9:6

Several years ago I read about a champion woodcarver from Bavaria who found a piece of wood in the mouth of a sack of grain. The wood was the same color as the grains of wheat, so he took it into his head to carve the wood into imitation grains. He carved a handful of them, mixed them with some real wheat, and then invited his friends to tell them apart. The woodcarver had done the work so well that no one could tell the difference. Even he was unable to tell the imitation grains from the true wheat. In the end the only way to distinguish the true from the false kernels was to place the grains in water. After a few days the real grain sprouted, while the imitation grain remained exactly what it was before: dead wood.

There is a parallel here to those who profess to be God's people. To human eyes there may be a time when some of the true children of God are almost indistinguishable from people who are merely behaving as believers or are circulating among believers. But the difference is there nevertheless. It has been put there by God. And in the end, since some of these people have the life of God within them and some do not, these who possess that life will show it by their spiritual growth.

Natural Israel and Spiritual Israel

The distinction between those who seem to be spiritual children and those who actually are is critical to understanding the next section of Romans. But in order to see it we have to step back a bit and review what Paul is saying.

Paul is dealing with a troublesome problem faced by himself and the other early preachers of the gospel. The original Christians were Jews. Thus they very naturally began obeying the Great Commission by witnessing to their Jewish family members, Jewish friends, and Jewish neighbors. Since the promises of the Messiah were to Israel and since Jesus of Nazareth was that Messiah, according to their belief and understanding, Israel should have been willing to embrace him. But Israel as a whole did not, and as time went on the people who were becoming
Christians and the largest number of emerging Christian churches were overwhelmingly Gentile.

This was a severe disappointment to the early evangelists, even a great sorrow, as Paul's opening paragraph in Romans 9 makes clear. But even more than this, it was a theological dilemma. The promises of God were to Israel, and yet Israel as a whole was unresponsive. Did this mean that God's promises to Israel had failed, that is, that God had himself failed? That God was impotent in the face of unbelief? Or did it mean that the promises of God could not be trusted? That in the matter of salvation God was simply free to change his mind?

This is the problem Paul wrestles with in the middle section of Romans, chapters 9 through 11. He has a number of arguments, which I summarized in the initial study in this volume. But the first of these, introduced in Romans 9:6, is that the promises of God were not made to all the physical descendants of Abraham, but only to those whom God had elected to salvation and in whom he had therefore implanted or was implanting life.

Paul states this by saying, "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." A little later and in a similar way, he contrasts those who are Abraham's "descendants" with those who are his true "children" (v. 7).

At first glance this argument may seem to be merely a novel idea, perhaps even an "argument from desperation," as some would have it. But it is nothing of the sort. That not all Israel was true Israel was

already an Old Testament perception. In the following verses, which we will explore in the next study, Paul shows that the distinction goes back to the patriarchs themselves. But even if this original distinction should be discounted, every Jew was aware of the contrast made by the prophets between the nation as a whole and the remnant. In the declining days of ancient Jewish history leading up to the overthrow of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. and the destruction of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., it was increasingly obvious that the nation as a whole was apostate and that only a few Jews gave any indication of being among God's genuine people.

It was the same at the coming of Christ. The nation as a whole was going about its business with little true faith at all, just as most people, both Jew and Gentile, do today. It was only a few individuals, like Joseph and Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, "who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).

When Jesus appeared on the scene to begin his public ministry, he, too, made the distinction. In fact, this is one of the earliest things recorded of him. In John 1:43-46, we are told how Jesus called Philip to be one of his disciples and how Philip immediately found his friend Nathanael and brought him to Jesus. When Jesus saw Nathanael he said, "Here is a true Israelite..." (v. 47). It was the precise distinction Paul is making in this chapter.

Nor should we overlook the fact that Paul has already made this contrast in Romans. In the second chapter he was trying to show that even highly moral and religious Jews need the gospel, like Gentiles, because neither the law, which they fail to keep, nor circumcision, the outward mark of the covenant people, can save them. Circumcision, like other religious ceremonies, has value only if it corresponds to an internal transformation. It is the heart that must be circumcised. Paul's summary says, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is

one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Rom. 2:28-29a).

How could it be otherwise, so long as we are dealing with spiritual matters and with God, who does not deal only with appearances but with reality? Clearly, God is not deceived by ceremonies.

What Is Required

What is required for one to be a true Israelite? We have already looked at a long list of things that are not required, at least things that do not in themselves make one a true child of God. They are the items Paul lists in verses 2 through 5: "the adoption... the divine glory... the receiving of the law... the temple worship... the promises... [and] the patriarchs." These are real privileges that impart important spiritual advantages. But they do not bring salvation themselves. Indeed, not even being in the line that produced the Messiah is advantageous for salvation.

What, then, is required?

There is only one answer, and Paul has already developed it fully in the earlier parts of the letter. It is faith, saving faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and Savior. It is belief that Jesus died in our place, taking our sins upon himself, and that by faith in him we are delivered from the punishment due us for those transgressions and instead are counted as righteous through the righteousness of Christ. The "true Israel" of the Old Testament looked forward to Jesus' coming and believed on him whom they did not yet know. The "true Israel" of the New Testament looks backward in time, believing on him who has come and whom they do know.

Paul's chief example of such faith is Abraham, whose story is told in summary form in Romans 4. Abraham was not saved by circumcision, because he was declared to be righteous before God in Genesis 15:6, which was years before his later circumcision. Nor was he saved by keeping the law, because no one, not even Abraham, is able to keep the law perfectly. The law only brings wrath and condemnation. Besides, the law was not even given until the time of Moses, which was four

hundred years after Abraham's time. How, then, was Abraham saved? It was by faith, which is what made Abraham a true Israelite.

Paul says that "the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed —the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Rom. 4:16-17).

As Paul will show, it is that call of God followed by faith that makes one a true member of God's family.

Cultural Christians and True Christians

This is also true for those who call themselves Christians. That is, not all who call themselves Christians or who are thought of as Christians are true Christians.

Some years ago an English writer named Leslie Stephen said that the name "Christian has become one of the vaguest epithets in the language." This is true, perhaps even more so today than when those words were spoken. To many Jews, the name Christian is nearly synonymous with "goy" or "Gentile," so that for them the world is divided basically into two great parts: Jews and Christians. Other people speak of "Christian nations," by which they usually mean the western nations, those of Europe, the United States, Canada, and some others. They do this even though the cultural life of these nations is inconsistent with Christian teaching and only a small proportion of people in some of those countries ever attend a place of worship on Sunday.

What is happening? Obviously, it is a case of there being many who bear the name "Christian" but who are not actually Christians.

What is a true Christian?

The name itself gives us a clue, since it literally means "a Christ one." Let's approach it by its origins. The first time this name was used was in ancient Antioch of Syria in the early days of the expansion of the gospel beyond Palestine. Antioch was an immoral place. It had several great temples at which cultic prostitution was practiced, and the moral tone of the city was so bad that Antioch had become a byword for depravity in the ancient world. The city was on the Orontes River. So, on one occasion, when an orator in Rome wanted to describe the worsening moral conditions of his city, he observed that the Orontes had been diverted so as to flow into the Tiber. It was the equivalent of calling the Orontes a sewer that was carrying the filth of the eastern city into Rome.

In this degenerate city, God planted a body of genuine believers whom the pagans of Antioch began to call Christians. The Christians did not call themselves Christians. They had other names for themselves. They called themselves "people of The Way," "saints" (or separated ones), "disciples," "brothers," and other descriptive titles. Jews did not call them Christians, because Christ means "Messiah," and the Jews would never have called the sect of the Nazarene by that name.

No, the believers were first called Christians by the heathen, and for obvious reasons. The believers were enamored of Christ and followed so closely after Christ that the pagans could hardly think of a believer without thinking of the Jesus he or she was following. They were "Christ's people."

Theologically, this has several parts. It means that:

1. *Christians believe in Christ.* The Christ of the early Christian community, and of all true

Christians everywhere, is the Christ of the New Testament, which means that he is the Son of God who became a man for our salvation. This is the one on whom the Christians believed. Moreover, this belief was no mere intellectual conviction. I have often said that faith (or belief) has three elements. The first is its intellectual content: who Jesus is and what he has done for our salvation. The second is the warming of

the heart: being moved by Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. The third is personal commitment, the most important part of all. It means giving oneself to Jesus, becoming his, taking up his cross, being a disciple.

This is what the believers in Antioch had done. They had committed themselves to Jesus so thoroughly that the pagans who looked on said, "They are Christ ones, Christians."

2. *Christians follow Christ.* There was a second characteristic of these first Christians, which is also characteristic of all true Christians at all times. It is wrapped up in the matter of commitment, as I have just indicated: Christians are followers of Jesus. That is, if they have believed on him in a saving way and not merely by some mere abstract intellectual assent to his deity, then they are following after him on the path he sets before them. That path is the path of obedience, and as they walk along it they become increasingly like the one they are following and obeying.

This is an important dimension of what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian means to believe on Jesus, surely. But it also means to be following after Jesus and thus becoming increasingly like him. A true Christian is someone who is becoming like Jesus Christ.

3. *Christians witness to Christ.* I think there must have been another reason why the early

Christians were called Christians, and it is that they were apparently always talking about their Savior. The name of Jesus was constantly on their tongues, his gospel consistently on their hearts, and his glory uppermost in their minds. They were always looking for others whom they could tell about him, and they were always praying and working at their witness so that these others might be saved.

It is significant in this respect that the first great missionary movement of the church began in

Antioch. We are told about it in Acts 13: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'

So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (vv. 2-3). Paul undertook three missionary journeys at the direction of this church and with accountability to it, for at the end of each assignment he reported back to the congregation what God had done to save other Gentiles and some Jews through him.

We cannot forget that Jesus himself said that his followers would be witnesses: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

4. *Christians learn more and more about Christ.* Here is a fourth thing that is characteristic of true Christians. They want to learn more about Jesus. We are told of the Christians at Antioch that after Barnabas had gone to their city to encourage the infant church in its faith, he then went to Tarsus in Turkey to look for Paul, whom he remembered from earlier days (Acts 11:22-25). When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch so that "for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people" (v. 26a). It is significant that it was immediately after this, after the Christians at Antioch had been carefully taught about Jesus, that they "were first called Christians" (v. 26b).

As they learn about Jesus Christ, Christians naturally become more like him, intensify their love for him, and witness about him to others.

A Time for Self-Examination

The point of all this is that each of us who calls himself or herself a Christian should be led to self-examination. And what we should ask ourselves is: "Am I a true Christian, or am I a Christian in name only?" This is a serious question and a necessary one. For if Israel—with all the spiritual advantages that Paul mentions in Romans 9—could be composed of thousands or even millions who were not true Israel, it is certain that the visible church of Jesus Christ in our day is filled with many who are actually unbelievers.

Paul told the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5a).

Peter told his readers, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10a).

How can we test ourselves? How can we be sure we are Christians? There are a number of specific questions to be answered that pertain to the matters I have just been discussing.

1. *Do I believe on Christ?* The first requirement is faith, because faith is our point of contact with the gospel. Paul told the Philippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31a). Ask yourself, "Have I believed on Jesus?" Not, "Have I believed on him in broad cultural terms?"—like anyone in the western world might be expected to do, especially if he or she has been raised in a Christian home or has attended a Christian church. But rather, "Have I been touched by knowledge of Jesus' death for me, and have I committed myself to him?

Am I serious about following after Christ, obeying his commands, and pleasing him?"

2. *Am I following after Christ?* The first question leads to the next: "Am I actually Jesus' follower?" The way Jesus called his followers was by the words *Follow me.* And when they did follow him, their lives were inevitably redirected. Some had been fishermen, but when they began to follow Jesus they became fishers of men. One had been a tax collector, but after he had followed Jesus, he became concerned with the currency of heaven. Nobody who has begun to follow Jesus Christ has ever been entirely the same or walked in the same paths afterward.

So ask yourself: "Has my life been redirected? Is there anything I am doing now that I did not do before or would not be doing were I not committed to Jesus? And are there things I have stopped doing? Is Jesus my very own Lord and Savior?"

3. *Do I testify to Christ?* This is a harder point for true self-examination, because it is easier for some to talk about Jesus than for others. It is easier for some to talk about nearly anything than for others. Nevertheless, this is an important question and one worth asking. If you never speak to anyone about Jesus, how can you suppose that you really care about him and love him, not to mention caring about and loving the other person, who needs to receive the Savior?

Nominal Christians do not talk about Jesus. They are content to let everyone believe as he or she likes. They wouldn't think of trying to impose their beliefs on others. But not all who are Christians are true Christians, just as "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."

Examine yourself. Do you testify of Jesus?

4. *Am I learning about Christ?* The last of the four questions I have posed for determining whether or not you are a genuine Christian is: "Am I trying to learn more and more about Jesus Christ? Do I know more about him today than I did at the time of my conversion? Or at this time last year?"

I know people who claim to be Christians who never go to a Bible study, never take notes of a sermon and, as far as I can determine, never seriously study the Bible on their own. If you are one of them how can you think of yourself as a Christian when you have no interest in learning about the one who gave himself for you? How can you consider yourself a believer when you really don't care about Jesus?

Over the last few years I have been talking with diverse Christian leaders, and the one thing most of them say is that they see no hope for the United States or for American Christianity apart from a revival. The drift is so obviously downward. But what is a revival? A revival is the reviving of the alleged people of God, and it is preceded by an awakening in which many who thought themselves to be Christians come to their right senses and recognize that they are not new creatures

in Christ and that all is not well with their souls. Revival begins in the church, not in the world. It begins with people like you.

I, too, think we need a revival. But I do not see it happening. I want it to happen. I do not see it. But if it happens, why should it not begin with us? With you? May God grant it for his mercy's sake.

Chapter 127.
Three Generations of Election

Romans 9:7-12

I want to begin this study by saying that, in my judgment, we are now entering into the most difficult portion of the entire Bible, more difficult even than those very confusing sections in Daniel, Revelation, and other books that deal with prophecy. Romans 9-11 is concerned with election. But it is not this alone that makes these chapters difficult. What is really difficult is that these chapters, particularly chapter 9, also deal with the negative counterpart to election, the doctrine of reprobation (passing over of those who are not elected to salvation), and that they are written to prove that God is right in doing so.

The proper name for this kind of discussion is "theodicy." A theodicy is an attempt to vindicate the justice of God in his actions.

In this study we begin with the positive side of God's actions: election, which is the easiest place to start. But already we can hear objections. Some objections are pragmatic: "Why are Reformed people always harping on the doctrine of election?" We do not actually do this, of course; usually we speak of other doctrines. But election is so objectionable to most people that it sticks in their memories and makes them think that we are always talking about it.

A second class of objections is theological: "How can election be true? If election is true, free will is impossible, and we all know that we have free will." Or, "If election is true, why should we evangelize?" Election and free will are not incompatible, as we have seen before in these

studies and will see again. But an explanation of why they are not incompatible takes time, and most people are not willing to wait for the explanation.

Other objections are belligerent: "If election is true, God is not just. I could never believe in a God like that." That, of course, is the question with which theodicy deals, and we will come to it.

A Basis in Fact

Where do we begin? I suggest that we begin exactly where the apostle begins in Romans, namely, with the fact of election itself. The reasons are obvious. First, there is no sense arguing over the justice of God in electing some to salvation and passing over others unless we are first convinced that he does. If we do not believe this, we will not waste our time puzzling over it. Second, if we are convinced that God elects to salvation, as Paul is going to insist he does, we will approach even the theodicy question differently. We will approach it to find understanding, rather than arrogantly trying to prove that God cannot do what the Bible clearly teaches.

To seek understanding is one thing. God encourages it. But to demand that God conform to our limited insights into what is just or right is another matter entirely.

So let me begin by saying that as long as we believe that God exercises *any* control over history or the lives of his people, then we must come to terms with election one way or another. It is inescapable.

Why? For this reason. When Jesus called his first disciples, he called twelve and not more. Others might very well have profited from having spent the following three years in close association with Jesus. But Jesus chose only twelve for this privilege. Moreover, when he sent his disciples into the world to tell others about him, by necessity each of these early preachers went in one direction rather than another. Philip went to Samaria. Barnabas went to Antioch. Later Paul and Barnabas went north to Asia Minor. Still later Paul and other companions went to

Greece, then Italy, and eventually further west. In each case a choice was involved: north rather than south, west rather than east. If God was directing the movement of these servants of his at all, he was choosing that some should hear the gospel of grace rather than others, which is a form of election—even apart from the matter of a choice to call some to active faith by means of an internal call.

The same is true in our experience. If you believe that God is leading you to speak to someone about the gospel, it is an inescapable fact that you are speaking to that person rather than another. And even if a Christian friend should join you and speak to that other person, there are still millions who are inevitably passed by. Election is an inescapable fact of human history.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

This is not the way Paul presents the doctrine, of course, though it is close enough to get us thinking along the right lines. What Paul does do is go back to the earliest moments in the history of the Jewish people, to the stories of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and show that election operated there. We remember, of course, that the apostle is trying to explain why not all Israel has been saved and why the fact that they have not been saved does not mean that God's purpose or promises have failed. In the case of these three fathers of the nation, he is going to show that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became what they were by election and that others were not granted this privilege.

1. *Abraham.* Election is obvious in the case of Abraham, which is one reason why Paul does not discuss his case in detail, though he does mention him. Abraham had a pagan ancestry, having been born in the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia. He had no knowledge of the true God, because no one in Ur had knowledge of the true God. In fact, Abraham's family worshiped idols. Joshua said this explicitly in the sermon recorded in the twenty-fourth chapter of the book that bears his name: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and

worshiped other gods'" (Josh. 24:2). Years later, even after God had called Abraham out of this pagan environment and had taught him and through him had instructed Abraham's son and grandson about himself as the true God, idols were still possessed and cherished in this family, since Rachel, the wife of Jacob, hid them from her father when he came after them in the incident recorded in Genesis 31.

Abraham did not seek God. God sought Abraham. Since the call of Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12, every Jew would have to confess that Jewish history began with that election.

2. *Isaac.* But those to whom Paul is writing might argue that this is beside the point, which is probably also why Paul does not deal with Abraham's story at great length. They would admit that God had to start somewhere, after all. Besides, they might say, the matter being discussed is not whether God has elected the nation of Israel to some specific destiny apart from other nations. That much had been conceded by everyone. Paul himself has spoken of the adoption as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, and other privileges that were granted to Israel alone. No one disputed the election of the nation. The real issue was whether all the descendants of Abraham, that is, all Jews, were thereby saved, or whether the principle of choice and rejection also applies after the initial choice of Abraham.

In other words, does God continue to choose some but not all, some Jews and some Gentiles but not all from either category?

Since this is the issue, Paul begins his actual argument in verse 7 with the case of Abraham's son Isaac. His argument reads: "Not because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son'" (vv. 7-9).

The point of this statement is that Abraham had another son. He had begotten Ishmael of Hagar, thirteen years before Isaac was born. Yet Ishmael was not chosen. He was Abraham's physical descendant, but he was not a child of promise as Isaac was.

There is something else in this example: the contrast between "natural" in the phrase "natural children" and "children of the promise" (v. 8). That contrast, plus the quotation from Genesis 18:10, 14 in verse 9, shows that the difference between Isaac and Ishmael was not merely that God elected Isaac and passed over the other son, but also that the choice of God involved a supernatural intervention in the case of Isaac's conception. Ishmael was born of Abraham's *natural* powers. But Isaac was conceived when Abraham was past the age of engendering children and when Sarah was past the age of conceiving and giving birth.

It is the same with our spiritual conception and new birth, which is the inevitable outworking of God's electing choice and is likewise supernatural. We cannot engender spiritual life in ourselves, for, according to Ephesians 2:1, we are spiritually dead. For us to become spiritually alive, God must do a miracle.

3. *Jacob*. Yet there is still an objection. Paul's readers could argue that Ishmael was not a pureblooded Jew. "It is true," they might say, "that Ishmael was the son of Abraham. Yet he was not the son of Sarah. He was the son of Hagar, and Hagar was only Sarah's servant. That is why Ishmael was not chosen."

In order to answer this point, Paul passes to the third generation of election, to the case of Rebekah's twin children, the sons Jacob and Esau. The words "not only that" in verse 10 show that he is continuing the argument. "Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger'" (vv. 10-12).

This is a remarkably effective example, since it proves everything that Paul needed or wanted to make his point.

First, Jacob and Esau were born of the same Jewish parents. That is, each was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews," the phrase Paul used to describe his own Jewish ancestry in Philippians 3:5. Each was a pure-blooded Jew. So there is no case of one having been chosen on the basis of a better ancestry and the other having been rejected on the basis of a lesser one. The supposed reason for the choice of Isaac over Ishmael is eliminated in the case of Jacob and Esau.

Second, the choice of Jacob rather than Esau went against the normal standards of primogeniture, according to which the elder should have received the greater blessing. True, the boys were twins. But Esau actually emerged from Rebekah's womb first, though Jacob was chosen. There is nothing to explain this except God's sovereign right to dispose of the destinies of human beings as he pleases, entirely apart from any rights thought to belong to us due to our age or other factors.

Third—and this is the most important point of all—the choice of Jacob instead of Esau was made before either child had opportunity to do either good or evil. It was made while the children were still in the womb. This means—we cannot miss it—that election is not on the basis of anything done by the individual chosen.

Moreover, the choice was made, at least in the case of Jacob, to teach the doctrine of election. That is what verses 11 and 12 say. "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—*in order that God's purpose in election might stand:* not by works but by him who calls..." (emphasis added). This means that God made his choice before the birth of Rebekah's sons to show that his choices are unrelated to anything a human being might or might not do. It is a case, as Paul will say just a few verses further on, that "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy" (v. 18).

Individuals or Nations?

I am aware that at this point many will already be saying, "But that's not fair. It is wrong for God to choose one and not another. To be fair, God has to give everyone a chance." We are going to come back to that question later and answer it. We are going to show that not only is salvation by election fair, it is the only thing that is fair. Besides, it is the only chance we have. It is election or nothing.

But before we get to that, there is another matter.

I have been writing about three generations of election in the cases of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But there are people who admit Paul's teaching about election in these verses and yet regard it as the election of nations rather than of individuals. They say that it is an election of the Jewish nation only and that, if this is so, these verses have little, if anything, to say about election as it is commonly understood.

Is Romans 9 dealing with the election of Israel only? We need to think through the arguments carefully.

First, there are a few reasons to think that Paul *is* dealing with nations rather than individuals. For one thing, the Bible speaks elsewhere of Israel as an elect nation. So the idea of an election of a specific people to some predetermined destiny is not strange to Scripture.

Again, there is no question that the oracle spoken to Rebekah before the birth of Jacob and Esau did involve more than individuals. The Genesis 25:23 text says—though Paul does not quote this part, and the omission may itself be significant—that "two *nations* are in your womb, and two *peoples* from within you will be separated; one *people* will be stronger than the other..." (emphasis added). Later in Genesis a good bit of space is given to the nation that Esau founded, and the remainder is about Israel.

Again, it might be argued that Paul's overall argument in Romans 9-11 concerns the future place of Israel in God's plan. In fact, this is where he ends up: "And so *all Israel* will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And

this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins'" (Rom. 11:26-27, emphasis added).

Good arguments, and yet not sufficient. For, in spite of the fact that Paul's overall argument in these chapters concerns the future of Israel as a nation, that is not the point he is making at the start of chapter 9. At this point he is distinguishing between individual Jews, some of whom have been elected to salvation and are therefore "true Israel," in contrast to others who have not been and are therefore Israel by physical descent alone. These latter may be the natural children of Abraham, but they are not his spiritual children. They are not children of the promise.

Of the more recent commentators, it is John Murray who works through these arguments most carefully, concluding like this: "The thesis that Paul is dealing with the election of Israel collectively and applying the clause in question [that "God's purpose in election might stand"] only to this feature of redemptive history would not meet the precise situation. The question posed for the apostle is: How can the covenant promise of God be regarded as inviolate when the mass of those who belong to Israel, who are comprised in the elect nation in terms of the Old Testament passages cited above (Deut. 4:37 *et al*.), have remained in unbelief and come short of the covenant passages?... Paul's answer is not the collective election of Israel but rather 'they are not all Israel, who are of Israel.' And this means, in terms of the stage of discussion at which we have now arrived, 'they are not all elect, who are of elect Israel.' As we found above, there is the distinction between Israel and the *true* Israel, between children and *true* children, between the seed and the *true* seed. In such a distinction resides Paul's answer to Israel's unbelief." What does this mean?

It means that although the biblical doctrine of election does not exclude the choice of nations for specific purposes in history, the doctrine does nevertheless also and more fundamentally refer to the choice of individuals—and that it is on this basis alone, not on any supposed right of birth or by the doing of works, that a person is brought into the covenant of salvation.

Radical Depravity and Election

How could it be otherwise, if the condition of fallen humanity is as bad as the Bible declares it to be? When we were studying the third chapter of Romans we saw that Paul's summary of the fall was expressed in these words:

> *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
>
> *Romans 3:10-11*

This is an expression of what Reformed thinkers refer to as total or radical depravity. It means that there is not a portion of our being that has not been ruined by sin. Sin pervades all our actions and darkens all our natural understanding, with the result that, rather than fleeing to God, who is our only reasonable object of worship and our only hope of blessing, we flee from him.

How could a creature as depraved as that possibly come to God unless God should first set his saving choice upon him, regenerate him, and then call him to faith? How could a sinner like that believe the gospel unless God should first determine that he or she should believe it and then actually enable him or her to believe?

Of course, that is exactly what God does. In fact, we have already seen this action explained at length in Romans 8, where Paul spoke of a five-step process involving foreknowledge (or election), predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. Those five terms describe the very essence of salvation, and the significant thing is that God is the author of each one. It is he who foreknows, he who predestines, he who calls, he who justifies, and he who glorifies.

The only thing Paul is adding in Romans 9 is that this is entirely apart from any supposed right of birth or good works. It is due entirely to the will and mercy of the sovereign God.

Do you still have questions about this? If you do, I am not surprised. I have questions myself. It is why I have called Romans 9-11 the most

difficult portion of the Bible. I also have questions about the doctrine of the Trinity and other matters. But although I have questions, I nevertheless believe these doctrines and rejoice in them. I am suggesting that you do, too. Why? Because election means that salvation is of God. It is his idea and his work, and therefore it is as solid as God himself is.

If salvation were up to me, I would blow it. Even if I could choose God savingly, which I cannot, I would soon unchoose him and so fall away and be lost. But because God chooses me, I can know that I am secure because of his eternal and sovereign determination. God began this good work. And "he who began [this] good work... will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Did you know that the doctrine of election was the chief factor in the conversion of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century? Spurgeon believed it and was blessed by it, because he knew his own spiritual inability. Apart from election, he knew he would be lost. Be like him. The more you are, the more you will rejoice in election, however puzzling parts of it may be.

Chapter 128.
Double Predestination

Romans 9:13-18

When I began the last study I pointed out that, in my judgment, we are examining the most difficult portion of the entire Bible. Not only because it deals with election, which troubles many, but even more because it deals with reprobation, the doctrine that God rejects or repudiates some persons to eternal condemnation in a way parallel but opposite to the way he ordains others to salvation. Reprobation is the teaching we come to specifically in Romans 9:13-18, which makes these verses an excessively difficult passage for many, if not most, people.

The doctrine is brought into our text by two Old Testament quotations: Malachi 1:2-3 ("Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," cited in v. 13) and Exodus 9:16 ("I raised you [Pharaoh] up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth," cited in v. 17).

Paul summarizes the teaching in these texts by concluding, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (v. 18).

In the view of many people, the doctrine these verses express is a "monstrous doctrine" that turns God into an indifferent deity who sits in heaven arbitrarily assigning human destinies, saying, as it were, "This one to heaven, and I don't care. This one to hell, and I don't care."

This is a caricature, of course. But it is something we must deal with, since no one can seriously attempt to study or teach the Bible, as I am doing, without confronting it. More to the point, it is impossible to study election without also dealing with its negative counterpart. Some years ago the theme of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, which I began in 1974, was "predestination," and the subject of reprobation was assigned to Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, California. He had been talking to his wife about his subject and asked her what she thought he should call it.

She said, "Call it: 'Double or Nothing.'"

That may be a bit frivolous, but it is accurate, since it is impossible to have election, the positive side of predestination, without reprobation, which is the negative side. John Calvin recognized this, as have many others in the course of church history. He wrote, "Election [cannot] stand except as set over against reprobation."

It is easy to distort this doctrine, of course, as the caricature shows. We must proceed slowly and humbly, recognizing our own limited

understanding. Still we must try to see what the Bible does teach about reprobation, since the subject cannot be avoided.

Proof from Scripture

The place to begin is with the fact of reprobation, as taught in the Bible, regardless of the questions we may have. In other words, we must follow the same procedure with reprobation as we followed in the last study with its positive counterpart, election.

There are many texts that teach reprobation. Here are a few:

Proverbs 16:4. "The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster."

John 12:39-40. "They [the people of Jesus' day] could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes / and deadened their hearts, / so they can neither see with their eyes, / nor understand with their hearts, / nor turn—and I would heal them.'"

John 13:18. [Jesus said,] "... I know those I have chosen. But this [Jesus' betrayal by Judas] is to fulfill the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.'"

John 17:12. [Jesus prayed,] "While I was with them [the disciples], I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled."

1 Peter 2:7-8. "Now to you who believe, this stone [Jesus Christ] is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for."

Jude 4. "Certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you...."

There are many other texts along these lines, but the clearest are those in Romans 9, which we are studying, since they use the word *hate* of Esau ("Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated") and "harden" of Pharaoh ("Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden"). In fact, verses 1-29 are the most forceful statement of double predestination in the Bible.

"Hated" or "Loved Less"?

The language of this chapter is so strong that quite a few writers have tried to soften it.

1. *The word* hate. There are people who, quite understandably, have found themselves unhappy with the word *hate* and who have therefore tried to interpret it in the sense, not of outright hatred but of merely "loving less." The great Charles Hodge has done this, writing, "It is evident that in this case the word *hate* means *to love less, to regard and treat with less favor*."

Here is where we have to begin to tread very carefully, for there is something to be said for
Hodge's view. For one thing, "hate" *is* used this way in Scripture. For example, in Genesis 29:32-
33 it is used of Jacob's feelings for Leah, his less-favored wife, where the New International Version rightly has Leah saying, "I am not loved." Or again, in Luke 14:26 Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." It is generally felt that Jesus is not speaking of a literal hatred here but of priorities.

Another very telling argument for Hodge's view is that nowhere else in *the* Bible is God said to hate any specific individual, though he does hate the *deeds* of evildoers and is even said to hate "all who do wrong" in Psalm 5:5. God hates sin.

What shall we say about this interpretation? Two things. First, even if the word *hate* should be understood to mean "love less," this loving less is nevertheless of a sufficiently negative nature to account for Esau's being rejected by God rather that being chosen, as Jacob was. For that is the point of the citation. Paul is using the example to illustrate how God chooses one and not another, call the rejection what you will.

Second, it is hard to escape seeing that although hatred in God is of a different character than hatred in sinful human beings—his is a holy hatred—hate in God nevertheless does imply disapproval. John Murray is at pains to explain this in his commentary, replying to Hodge, where he concludes rightly that "Esau was not merely excluded from what Jacob enjoyed but was the object of a displeasure which love would have excluded and of which Jacob was not the object because he was loved." Since the selection involved in the words *love* and *hate* was made before either of the children was born, the words must involve a double predestination in which, on the one hand, Jacob was destined to salvation and, on the other hand, Esau was destined to be passed over and thus to perish.

2. *The word* harden. The second term commentators have tried to soften is the word *harden*, usually pointing out that, in Exodus, Pharaoh is also said to have hardened himself (Exod. 8:32; 9:34). The argument is that God hardened Pharaoh's heart only in the sense that he allowed Pharaoh to harden it himself, or hardened him judicially as a punishment for his prior unbelief or self-hardening.

There is no question but that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, of course. The verses say so. But here are a few observations. First, there are many more texts that say that God hardened him than say that he hardened himself. Second, in Exodus, the first references are to God's hardening of Pharaoh (cf. 4:21; 7:3, etc.) and not to Pharaoh's self-hardening. Third, even if Pharaoh's selfhardening is given the strongest possible meaning, it is still in the category of "secondary causes" for which God always assumes primary responsibility. In other words, just as in the case of prayer or witnessing by Christians, what we do matters but is effective only because God has determined beforehand that it should be,

so also here. Though human beings have responsibility for what they do or do not do, God nevertheless is in control of his universe. It is he (and not we) who rules history.

Two Important Distinctions

But now it is time to make a few important distinctions between election and reprobation. The question we must ask is: Are the actions involved in these two doctrines to be thought of in exactly the same way? Specifically, to use the proper language for this theological differentiation, are they equally ultimate?

What is meant by that question is this: Does God determine the destinies of individuals in exactly the same way so that, without any consideration of what they do or might do, he assigns one to heaven and the other to hell? We know he does that in the case of those who are being saved, because we have been told that election has no basis in any good seen or foreseen in those who are elected. In fact, we are told that in Romans, for Paul's point is that salvation is due entirely to God's mercy and not to any good that could be imagined to reside in us. The question is whether this can be said of the reprobate, too, that God has consigned them to hell apart from anything they have done, apart from their deserving it.

Here, I think, there is an important distinction to be made between election and reprobation. Nor am I the only one who thinks so. This has been the view of the majority of Reformed thinkers and is the teaching embodied in the great Reformed creeds.

Take the Westminster Confession of Faith, for example. Here are the two paragraphs concerning election and reprobation:

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or

perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto: and all to the praise of his glorious grace. (Chap. 3, Sec. 5)

The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by: and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice. (Chap. 3, Sec. 7)

Those two statements concerning election and reprobation teach that in some respects they are the same: both flow from the eternal counsels or will of God, rather than the will of man, and both are for the end of making the glory of God known. In that respect we can speak of equal ultimacy.

But there are two important points of difference.

First, the confession speaks of the reprobate being "passed by." Some will argue that in its ultimate effect there is no difference between passing by and actively ordaining an individual to condemnation. But while that is true of the ultimate effect, there is nevertheless a major difference in the cause. The reason why some believe the gospel and are saved by it is that God intervenes in their lives to bring them to faith. He does it by the new birth or regeneration. But those who are lost are not made to disbelieve by God. They do that by themselves. To ordain their end, God needs only to withhold the special grace of regeneration.

Second, the confession speaks of God ordaining the lost "to dishonor and *wrath for their sin*" (emphasis added). That is a very important observation, for it makes reprobation the exact opposite of an arbitrary action. The lost are not lost because God willy-nilly consigns them to it, but rather as a just judgment upon them for their sins.

In these two respects election and reprobation are dissimilar.

Infralapsarian or Supralapsarian?

That leads me to two of the longest theological terms you will ever hear me utter. In fact, with the exception of "antidisestablishmentarianism," which has nothing to do with theology, these are the longest and most confusing words I know: *supralapsarianism* and *infralapsarianism.* I mention them here only because they describe a matter about reprobation that we need to touch on briefly.

Here is why we have to think about it. I have distinguished between election, which is unrelated to anything the elect might do or not do, and reprobation, which is, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith, "for their sin." But the question then is: When does God determine this in the case of the non-elect? If he ordains them to be punished for their sin, does he wait for them to sin before he makes this determination? That can't be right, because we know that election (as well as the passing over of the reprobate) has been determined by God before the foundation of the world. What, then, is the relationship of his preordination of the lost to their sin? Did God foresee their sin and then ordain them to be lost because of it? Or did he first ordain, after which sin inevitably entered into the world, and the lost are punished for it.

That is what these two terms deal with. *Infralapsarianism* means that in the timeless mind of God, this decision was made in view of the fall (the Latin word *lapsus* means "fall").
Supralapsarianism means that in the mind of God, this decision was made without any prior reference to it.

I am not sure this matter is of great importance or even if it is a true alternative, since it requires us to think in time categories, and God is clearly above or beyond time. Who are we to force time sequences on God? For what it is worth, however, it should be said that all the Reformed creeds are infralapsarian, simply because they want to keep from suggesting even for a moment that God consigns innocents to hell. They want to insist that God does nothing inconsistent with righteousness when he determines human destinies.

A Useful Doctrine

I suppose at this point some will be wondering, "If the doctrine of reprobation is as difficult as it seems to be, why should we speak about it at all?" The first answer to that is that the Bible itself does. It is part of the revelation given to us. This is also the primary answer to a person who says, "I could never love a God like that." Fair enough, we may say, but that is nevertheless the God with whom you have to deal. Nothing is to be gained by opposing reprobation.

But this is not a very satisfying answer, and there are satisfying and meaningful things to say about reprobation. It is a doctrine that, like all other parts of Scripture, has its "useful" aspects (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16).

1. *Reprobation assures us that God's purpose has not failed.* The first benefit of this doctrine is the very thing Paul is teaching in Romans 9, namely, that God's word has not failed (v. 6). We might ask the question in a personal way, wondering, "Will God fail me?" But the answer is that God has determined the outcome of all things from the beginning, and his word does not fail either in regard to the elect or to the reprobate. God does not begin a work he does not finish. He does not make promises he does not keep. So if you have heard his promises and believed his word, you can be sure he will be faithful to you. If others are lost, it is because God has determined that they should be. It does not mean that you will follow them.

"But am I one of the elect?" you ask. It is easy to know the answer to that question: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and begin to obey him. Those who do are the elect. That is how we determine who those persons are.

2. *Reprobation helps us deal with apostasy.* We all know people who have seemed to believe at one time, but who have then fallen away. Does this mean that God has failed them? No. It means that if they continue in their unbelieving state, they are not among God's elect people. Apostasy does not show that the plan of God has failed. Reprobation helps us understand it.

3. *Reprobation keeps before us the important truth that salvation is entirely of grace and that no works of man contribute to it.* If none were lost, we would assume that all are being saved because somehow God owes us salvation, that he must save us either because of who we are or because of who he is. This is not the situation. All are not saved. Therefore, the salvation of the elect is due to divine mercy only. We must never forget that. Indeed, as we will see over the next few studies, this is the dominant note of these important texts in Romans.

4. *Reprobation glorifies God.* As soon as we begin to think that God owes us something or that God *must* do something, we limit him and reduce his glory. Election and its twin, reprobation, glorify God, for they remind us that God is absolutely free and sovereign. We have no power over him. On the contrary, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18). God does as he wants in his universe.

One final question: Is reprobation an evangelical doctrine? That is, Is it part of the gospel? I believe it is, for this reason: Because reprobation stresses the glory of the sovereign God in his election, it inevitably highlights mercy and reduces those who hear and accept the doctrine to a position of suppliancy. It forces us to cry, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me." As long as we believe we are in control of our own destinies, we will never assume this posture. But when we understand that we are in the hands of a just and holy God and that we are without any hope of salvation apart from his free and utterly sovereign intervention, we will call out for mercy, which is the only right response.

"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," says the Almighty. If we believe that, our cry will be the cry of the tax collector: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). And who can fault that doctrine?

Chapter 129.

But Is God Just?

Romans 9:14-15

Ever since the fall, human beings have been trying to blame God for his actions or (which is almost the same thing) to call him to account. Adam did it in the Garden of Eden, saying, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Gen. 3:12). The people of Malachi's day, at the very end of the Old Testament period, were doing the same thing, asking God: "How have you loved us?... How have we shown contempt for your name?... How have we defiled you?... How do we rob you?... What have we said against you?" (Mal. 1:2, 6-7; 3:8, 13). They "wearied the LORD" with their words (2:17), yet were demanding that God give them an explanation for his actions.

It is the same today. In most discussions about spiritual things, our contemporaries are asking God to leave heaven, come down to earth, stand before the bar of our justice, and give an account of himself according to our small standards. C. S. Lewis even wrote an article about this characteristic, which he called "God in the Dock."

"If God is good, how could he let my mother die?" "What about cancer? Why doesn't God do something about it?" "It's not my fault. I would have done better if only God had given me a nicer disposition, more energy, kinder parents, better looks, a more advanced education, or something else."

We have all heard those accusations. But in no area of theology is the demand that God justify himself more insistent or accompanied by more shrill accusations of injustice than in regard to the predestination of some persons to salvation and the passing by of others. Even if we can be convinced that God does operate in this way, which most are not, we nevertheless scream out fiercely that it is not right for him to be selective.

The Second of Two Questions

Well, is it? "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" That is the way Paul puts the question in Romans 9:14, as he sets out to answer it.

As we begin, we should remember that this is the second of two important questions in this chapter. The first question, which we have already studied, is whether God has broken his word in passing over some Jews, who had not responded to the gospel, and by saving some Gentiles. The Old Testament is filled with promises to Israel. Does the fact that not all Jews are being saved not mean that God has broken those promises? Paul answered the question by explaining that the promises were never intended for those who are mere physical descendants of Abraham, that is, all ethnic Jews. Rather, as he says, the promise is to spiritual Israel, which means those out of ethnic Israel (as well as from the Gentile nations) whom God had elected to salvation.

Paul proved this by showing how God elected one person rather than another in the first three generations of Jewish history: Abraham rather than others who lived in Ur; Isaac rather than Abraham's other son, Ishmael; and Jacob rather than Esau. The last case was particularly telling, because in this generation the choice was made between twin boys and was announced to Rebekah, the mother, even before the sons were born, and thus before either had had opportunity to do either good or evil.

Clearly, God acts by the principle of election, choosing one and passing by another—whether or not we like it or agree with the justice of his actions in doing so.

But that brings us to the second question, the one I described in an earlier study as the question of theodicy: Is God *just* in his actions? Paul has shown that God discriminates between one individual and another. Indeed, no one who thinks deeply at all can readily deny it. All are not equal. Nor do all have equal opportunities, even in secular matters, not to mention religious ones. But is God just in allowing such situations? That is the question. Is it right for God to operate in this fashion?

Point of Departure

As soon as Paul asks the question, "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" he answers by an emphatic denial: "Not at all!" It is the strongest denial he can muster. The King James Bible has

"God forbid!"

That answer is not calculated to satisfy most people today, of course, and it is true that Paul goes on to give reasons for his answer in the following paragraphs. Nevertheless, the answer even in this form is important and is far more profound than most people might imagine. Besides, it is the only proper starting place.

Why? Because it puts us, fallen human beings, in our proper place, which is the only position from which we can begin to learn about spiritual things. The very nature of sin is wanting to be in God's place. But as long as we are trying to be in God's place, we will never be able to hear what God is saying to us. We will be arguing with him instead. In order to learn, we must begin by confessing that God is God and that he is therefore right and just in his actions, even though we may not understand what he is doing.

That is the only rational thing to do anyway, for two reasons. First, if there were injustice in God, the universe would fly apart. Paul is far more reasonable than our contemporaries when he begins with God's justice, for he knows that the righteous character of God must be the basis of everything that is. It is inconceivable to any right thinking mind that God should act wrongly. As Leon Morris writes, "To say that God is unjust is for Paul self-contradictory."

Second, it is only on the basis of some fundamental awareness of what justice is, an awareness of right and wrong, that we can ask the question we are asking. And where do we get that awareness of right and wrong but from God? In other words, if God were not just, we would not even be able to ask, "Is God just?" We would not be able even to conceive of the question. The fact that we can ask it does not mean that by ourselves we can find the explanation of how God is acting justly. That is why we have Romans 9. But it does mean that even in asking the question we are admitting in advance that God is just, rather than the opposite.

The Justification of God

So how are we to understand God's justice? We can start with the fact that God is just, as well as with the fact that he does elect some persons to salvation and does pass by others. But how are we to think about his justice in doing so? This is the theodicy question.

Here are the essential elements of the answer.

1. *All human beings deserve hell, not heaven.* No one who has followed Paul's argument in the earlier chapters of Romans can doubt this, and we do not need to restate those arguments now. It is enough to say that

> *There is no one righteous, not even one there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
> *All have turned away, they have together become worthless;*
> *there is no one who does good, not even one.*
>
> Romans 3:10-12

But we are talking about the justification of God here, and for that purpose the key word in what I have just said is "deserve." All human beings *deserve* hell, not heaven. We are not talking about whether all actually end up in hell or whether only some end up in hell and some in heaven. We are talking about what all deserve, and what they deserve is condemnation. That is justice. The justice of God, if it were to operate without regard to any other factor, could do nothing other than to send every human being to hell. Apart from those other factors, namely the electing grace of God and the death of Christ that makes it possible, this is what happens.

2. *If any individual is to be saved, it must be by mercy only, and mercy is in an entirely different category from justice.* Just as the key word in my first point was "deserve," so the key word in this second essential statement is "mercy."

Deserving is based upon what people have done. Mercy has nothing to do with what people have done but is something that finds its source in

the will of God only. In the text that Paul cites to make his point, the words "mercy" and "compassion" are used almost synonymously: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exod. 33:19b). But there is this slight difference. Compassion has to do with recognizing the poor or helpless state of a person and stooping to help that person. Mercy does the same, but its unique quality is that it is shown to people not only who do not deserve it but who in fact deserve the opposite. In this case, mercy describes the giving of salvation to people who actually deserve to perish. It is providing heaven for those who merit hell.

God shows mercy on the basis of Christ's work in taking the punishment due sinners upon himself. Even in this sense, the showing of mercy by God is according to justice. But this is not the theodicy question. The theodicy question has to do only with why God saves some in this way and not others.

3. *Even if God should save people on the basis of something in them —faith, good works, or whatever—this would actually be injustice, since people's backgrounds are unequal.*

Think it through. If God saved some people and not others on the basis of good works, which is what most people would like God to do, there would never be justice, because some inherit kinder or more serving temperaments than others and because environmental factors play a part. It is easy for a person who has been raised by two loving and moral parents to follow in their way and do good. Not all do, of course. But that truth is irrelevant to my argument. My point is only that it is easier for such persons to do good than it is for one who has been neglected by his or her parents or has been raised in a vicious or immoral environment.

Or take faith. Isn't it true that some persons simply are born more trusting than others, and others are instinctively more skeptical? Or, if we think of their environments, isn't it true that some receive the advantages of biblical teaching or moral instruction that others lack? If God's election were based on the ability of some to respond to him, by

faith or whatever, God would not be just in his selection. Some would be profoundly disadvantaged, and others inevitably would be privileged.

So election is not only just. It is just, and God is right in choosing some and passing by others. But—and here is the important thing—*election is the only thing that is just.* Election alone starts with all people at the same point and on the same level, all of whom deserve hell. Then it saves some and passes by others, all entirely apart from anything whatever in these elect or reprobate persons.

Two Irrepressible Objections

The answer to the theodicy question is in the points I just made, though we will go into it further as our studies of Romans 9 continue. But I know that it is not as easy as that to satisfy the objections that come to our rebellious (or perhaps merely questioning) minds.

There are two particularly.

1. *Shouldn't God show mercy to everyone?* This is the first question asked by a person who has followed the argument to this point and yet is unsatisfied. The person will agree that all deserve hell and that God does not have to save anyone. He will agree that if any are saved it is by mercy only, apart from anything anyone may have done or may do. "But," he will ask, "shouldn't God show mercy to everyone? Is it right for him to restrict his mercy to one group of people rather than showing it to all?"

If you are asking that question, and I suppose many are, let me say gently that you have still not grasped the situation. The operative word in the question is "should." It means "ought," "must," or "necessary" if justice is to be done. But as soon as we use that word, we are back in the realm of justice, and we are no longer dealing with mercy. "Should" implies obligation, and obligation has to do with justice. If there is any "should" in the matter, the issue is no longer mercy. We are talking

about justice, and justice, as we have already seen, can do nothing but send every human being to hell.

It is not justice we need from God. It is grace.

2. *Why doesn't God show mercy to everyone?* The second objection sounds like the first one, but it is really quite different. It is the question raised by a person who understands the difference between justice and mercy but is still wondering why God is selective. "Forget the word 'should,'" this person replies. "My question is simply: Why doesn't God save everyone?"

Let me begin by saying two things. First, this is a proper question to ask, because it is asking for understanding rather than demanding that God come down from heaven and submit to our standards of right and wrong. It is a matter of faith in search of enlightenment. Second, it is more difficult than the questions we have asked so far, because it is asking about God's reasons for doing something, and there is no way we can know what those reasons are unless God reveals them to us. Does he?

Romans 9:15 seems to say merely that this is the way God operates: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." In other words, a perfectly legitimate answer to our question is that the "why" of it is God's business. God does not owe us an answer. What is more, there are undoubtedly parts of the answer, if not all, that are not revealed. God has reasons that may forever be unknown.

Yet there is one revealed answer, though not all persons will like it. A Baptist professor and pastor named John Piper has written a detailed study of Romans 9:1-23 in which he argues that Paul's quotation from Exodus 33:19 in Romans 9:15 has to do with the character of God and with God's proper determination to make his nature known. In a careful study of Exodus 33, which we will also begin to look at carefully in our next study, Piper shows that the verse Paul quotes "is not merely a description of how God acted in any particular instance toward Moses

in granting him a theophany or toward Israel in renewing the covenant. Rather it is a solemn declaration of the nature of God, or (which is the same thing) a proclamation of his name and glory."

I admit that Piper's point is not easily seen in verse 15, the quotation from Exodus. It takes some hard technical study of the Old Testament context to realize it. But it is seen in the rest of this chapter.

First, Paul's quotation of Exodus 9:16 in verse 17: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" This deals with reprobation, the matter we were studying in the last chapter, and it explains at least one purpose of God in passing over some. It is to display his "power" in order that his powerful or sovereign name might be proclaimed throughout the earth. In other words, God thinks it is important that the created order should know that he is allpowerful, especially in overcoming and judging some who stand against him, as Pharaoh did. God shows this by judging them.

Second, Paul argues a few verses further on that God's "wrath," "power," "patience," "glory," and
"mercy" are displayed in election, on the one hand, and in reprobation, on the other: "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" (vv. 22-24).

What this means is that God considers the display of his attributes in human history to be worth the whole drama, to be worth the creation, fall, redemption, election, reprobation, and everything else. From God's point of view, the revelation of his glory is the great priority. **Why Is It Necessary?**

You will remember that I wrote a bit earlier that I am not at all sure this will satisfy all people. In fact, I know it will not. It may not satisfy you.

If you do not find it satisfying, even though it is what we find in Romans 9, you will probably be asking at this point, "But why should it be necessary for God's name to be glorified?"

There is only one answer I know, and it is this: Because it is right that his name be glorified. God is glorious. He should be glorified, and because this is a universe run by God, and not by us, that which is right will in the end be done. God will be honored, and all will bow before him.

But do you see how this is going? We began with the theodicy question: Is God right to act as he does? We were asking it because it did not seem right to us for God to select some for salvation and to pass by and judge others for their sin. But when we examine the question, as we have, we find that the matter is exactly the opposite of what we first imagined it to be. We have found that God acts as he does precisely because he is just. He glorifies his name in displaying wrath toward sinners and the riches of his glory toward those who are being saved because this is the only right thing for God to do. It is his very justice, not his injustice, that causes him to operate in this fashion.

If we object to this, our objection only shows that we are operating by a different and, therefore, a sinful standard. What we mean is that we want to compel God to save everybody, regardless of what they have done or not done or even whether they want his salvation.

The real wonder, of course, is that God displays his mercy. For by its very nature mercy is undeserved and unrequired. Yet God has done so. He has done so in saving sinners like you and me.

I like the way John Piper closes his exegetical study, for it is along the very line I have been following. Piper is aware that many will find these truths unpalatable. But, he says:

For those who, like myself, confess Romans 9 as Holy Scripture and accord it an authority over our lives, the implications of this exegesis are profound. We will surely not fall prey to the naive and usually polemical suggestions that we cease to pray or that we abandon

evangelism. If we did that we would only betray our failure to be grasped by this theology, as Paul was, who "prayed without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) and who labored in evangelism "harder than any of the other apostles" (1 Cor. 15:10).

On the contrary we will be deeply sobered by the awful severity of God, humbled to the dust by the absoluteness of our dependence on his unconditional mercy, and irresistibly allured by the infinite treasury of his glory ready to be revealed to the vessels of glory. Thus we will be moved to forsake all confidence in human distinctives or achievements and we will entrust ourselves to *mercy alone.* In the hope of glory we will extend this mercy to others that they may see our good deeds and give glory to our Father in heaven.

Chapter 130.
"Mercy" Is His Name

Romans 9:15

I hope you have noticed that in the last three of our studies of Romans 9—on election, reprobation, and the justice of God—we have ended by stressing God's "mercy." In the first study we saw that election is grounded in mercy. In the second we discovered that reprobation forces us back upon mercy, rather than causing us to appeal to any supposed rights we may have. In the third study we argued that the justice of God is established precisely upon his right to show and to withhold mercy as he wills.

I suppose there are people who might object to this procedure on the grounds that Christians simply like mercy and so stress it, passing by the much less attractive doctrine of wrath. But that is not the case. We stress mercy because the Bible stresses mercy, and because it is the most remarkable and unexpected of God's attributes.

There is nothing unexpected about condemnation, wrath, or reprobation. We deserve those. But that God should extend mercy to sinners and so

save some of them from his wrath is extraordinary.

Mercy is what Paul himself has been emphasizing throughout this section, and it is what he comes to again in verse 15, which we need to study now. The text says, "For he [that is, God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" In this text the words *hate*, *harden*, or *pass by* are not even mentioned. Instead, the emphasis is on the word *mercy* and its near equivalent, the word *compassion.*

Mercy in Election

The quotation comes from Exodus 33:19, which means that it has an Old Testament context. So, before we go on with Romans 9, we need to explore the context to better understand this key verse. In fact, from this point on we are going to have to go back into the Old Testament more than once, since Paul gives a number of Old Testament quotations in the latter half of Romans 9, all of which are intended to direct our minds to the ways in which God has operated by mercy in past days. Before we are done we are going to examine the mercy of God as it is revealed in the minor prophets Jonah and Hosea and in the major prophet Isaiah.

We begin by going back to what we have seen earlier in Romans 9. That is, we go back to the mercy of God shown in the choice of Israel to be a special people to whom he would thereafter continue to show grace.

We remember that the history of these people began with God's choice of Abraham, and later of Abraham's son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob, entirely apart from any good that might be imagined to be in them. Abraham was just like the rest of his contemporaries, a worshiper of false gods. But God set his love upon Abraham and called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans to be the father of a new nation through whom he would eventually send the Savior.

In the second generation God chose Isaac rather than Abraham's other son, Ishmael, and in the third generation he chose Jacob rather than Esau.

Those choices alone demonstrate the truth of the text Paul is quoting, for they prove that God had mercy on whom he would have had mercy and that he had compassion on whom he had compassion.

"Mercy" is God's name.

Mercy in Israel's Deliverance

Coming a bit closer to Exodus 33, we find that the opening chapters of Exodus deal with the deliverance from Egypt, climaxing in the Passover.

Moses had been sent to the powerful Egyptian ruler with the command to let the people go, and Pharaoh had refused, saying, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go" (Exod. 5:2). As a result, God unleashed a series of plagues on Egypt in which: (1) the waters of the land were turned to blood; (2) frogs were multiplied in huge quantities; (3) gnats infested everyone; (4) flies followed the gnats; (5) the animals were killed; (6) painful boils came upon the Egyptians; (7) hail destroyed the crops; (8) followed by locusts; and (9) darkness blotted out the sun for three days. These were
demonstrations of the power of God over the Egyptian gods, who were associated with the water, crops, fields, and sky. The greatest god was Ra, the sun god, who was subdued in judgment number nine. By the time the plagues were over, the country was destroyed, but still Pharaoh would not release the people.

God told Moses that the last plague was to be the death of the firstborn children of the land, as well as the firstborn of the animals, and that after this Pharaoh would let the people go. The plague would be unleashed by an angel of death who would pass through Egypt by night.

The Israelites were to prepare for the Passover by killing a lamb and spreading its blood upon the sides and tops of the door frames of the houses in which they were living, so that when the angel of death came

through the land he might see the blood and *pass over* the Israelite houses. This is where the word *Passover* comes from.

The Lord said, "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (Exod. 12:13).

This is what happened. That night the angel of death passed through the land, the firstborn of all the Egyptians were killed, the Jews were spared, and the next morning Pharaoh gave word that the people were to leave the country—though he later reversed his decision, pursued the people to destroy them, and was himself destroyed.

But here is the point of the story.

The people were not very spiritual, as the sequel will show, and there were undoubtedly many among the nation who would have thought for one reason or another that they merited special treatment by God and should therefore have been saved at the time of the exodus simply because they were Jews and deserved saving. Some would have pointed to their ancestry, as Jews did later. "We are Abraham's seed," they might have said. "That is why God delivered us." Many would have thought that they were better or more moral than the oppressive Egyptians. Everyone thinks that he or she is more moral than someone else, particularly someone he or she dislikes. Still others might have pointed to their years of bondage and suffering: "If God is just, surely we should be rewarded for our suffering and the Egyptians should be punished."

The way in which God actually delivered the people dispelled any such mistaken notions. It showed that they were saved by the mercy and grace of God only.

How? In this way. What would have happened if a Jew had decided that his ancestry or morality or suffering or anything else was sufficient to guarantee his deliverance and had therefore refused to spread the blood of the lamb upon the door frame of his or her house? The answer is that the angel of death would have struck down the firstborn in that house just as if it were the house of an Egyptian, for "there is no difference,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The Jews were a sinful people, "stiff-necked," as God would later describe them. They, too, deserved to die. But God set his love upon them and saved them for his mercy's sake.

Later Moses would write, "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples [or for any other human reason], for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:7-8).

"Mercy" is God's name.

Mercy at Mount Sinai

We come next to Exodus 32, the chapter immediately preceding the one in which Paul's quotation in Romans 9 is found. In doing so, we come to one of the most moving stories in the Old Testament. (We have already looked at it carefully in study 123 of this series, "Great Sorrow for a Great People.")

The people had left Egypt behind and had now arrived at Mount Sinai, where Moses was called up into the mountain to receive the law from God. While he was there the people whom he had left behind grew tired of waiting (he was there for forty days), and they got Aaron to make a little calf of gold, which they began to worship, calling it the god that had delivered them from Egypt. It was a terrible moment in their history, and God interrupted the giving of the law to Moses to tell Moses what was happening and threaten the destruction of that generation of the people, saying that he would begin again and make a new nation from Moses.

We remember from our earlier study how Moses pleaded for the people and eventually offered himself for judgment in their place, saying, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made

themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Exod. 32:31-32).

Moses did not know that he could not give himself for another. He, too, was a sinner and deserved—there is that word again, "deserved"—to die for his transgressions as much as they deserved to die for theirs. But God was aware that from the beginning he had planned to send his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be a sin offering in their place, to suffer hell for those he had chosen beforehand and would eventually draw to faith, and it was on the basis of that anticipated atonement by Christ that God extended mercy to them. In other words, the mercy shown to the people at Sinai had exactly the same basis as the mercy shown to the people on the night of the Passover, for the blood spread upon the door frames of the houses pointed forward to the coming substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

"Mercy" is God's name.

The Merciful God

This brings us to Exodus 33 and to the text Paul is quoting, which is a continuation of the story. God had spared the people following their apostasy at Sinai and had promised to send an angel to lead them into the Promised Land. But Moses was not satisfied with this arrangement. In his judgment, to be led by an angel was less than being led by God, and he did not want any lessening of the special relationship between God and the people that he and they had enjoyed previously. They were sinners, and any special relationship between themselves and God would have to be on the basis of the mercy of God and not their deserving. Still, they must be led by God or not at all. Moses did not want to lead the people, even with the help of an angel, unless God himself were with them.

In this moment of acute distress, Moses went out of the camp to the "tent of meeting" to speak with God and present his requests. There were three of them, all closely related.

First, Moses asked to be taught God's ways "so I may know you and continue to find favor with you" (v. 13). This means that he recognized that he was a sinner himself and so needed to be taught and kept by God if he was not to fall into the same sins the people had committed.

God promised to be with him and teach him.

Second, Moses pleaded for God's personal and continued presence: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (vv. 15-16). He meant that the people could never be distinguished from other people by anything in them, but only on the basis of God's undeserved presence with them.

God promised Moses that he would do what he had asked.

Then Moses made the boldest request of all: "Now show me your glory" (v. 18). God replied that he would not be able to show his face to Moses, because no human being can see the face of God and live. But he would reveal his goodness and proclaim his name to Moses, which he did by placing him in the cleft of a rock, covering the opening with his hand, and then causing his goodness to pass before him.

It is in this context, in the midst of God's answer to Moses' third question, that the quotation by Paul in Romans occurs. The text says, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (v. 19). This verse is the climax of the story, and its point is that the very name or character of God is bound up in his mercy. The display of his name is the proclamation of his compassion.

The record of God's dealings with Israel in her election, deliverance, and preservation, even when the people had sinned against grace, as

well as this climactic revelation of glory, show that "mercy" is God's name.

God's Name and God's Glory

When I was writing in the previous study about the justice of God in saving some persons and passing by others, I referred to a study of Romans 9:1-23 by a Baptist professor and pastor whose name is John Piper. Part of his study is an examination of Exodus 33:19 in its context, and his conclusions are what I present here.

Commentators on Romans 9:15 have done all manner of strange things with this verse in an attempt to weaken the doctrine of God's rightful sovereignty in the matters of election and reprobation. Some have referred it only to God's mercy to Moses in granting him a theophany. Others have limited it to God's renewal of the covenant with Israel following the people's sin. But the verse surely means more than this, as Piper and indeed the entire context of God's electing choice, deliverance, and preservation of Israel make clear.

What is involved is no less than the revelation in history of God's true name or character. In other words, election and the corresponding doctrine of reprobation are the means by which God's compassion and mercy (as well as his power and wrath) are made known.

As Piper puts it, "In its Old Testament context, Exodus 33:19 is not merely a description of how God acted in any particular instance toward Moses in granting him a theophany or toward Israel in renewing the covenant. Rather it is a solemn declaration of the nature of God, or (which is the same thing) a proclamation of his name and glory."

Mercy with the Lord

We are going to be coming back to this theme again, as I said when we started, because mercy is the dominant note in this chapter. But we need a few conclusions here before we go on.

1. *We need mercy if we are to be saved.* I have said this before, but it can never be said enough, simply because we do not think this way naturally. We think in terms of justice, because we suppose ourselves to be deserving. But we are not deserving, at least not of anything but eternal punishment. If we are to be saved, we must not come to God pleading our deserts but on the basis of his mercy. We need mercy. Apart from it we will perish.

2. *God is a God of mercy.* Here is the good news. God is a God of mercy. True, he is also God of justice and wrath. Sin will be punished. The wrath of God will be made known along with his other great attributes. But God emphasizes mercy. He offers mercy. To find mercy we must come to God on the basis of the shed blood of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died to be our Savior. The mercy of God is seen at the cross of the Savior. That is the ultimate expression of mercy and the basis for God's election of some to salvation.

3. *We can appeal to mercy.* We have been speaking about election and therefore of the sovereign right of God to show mercy to whom he will show mercy and compassion to whom he will show compassion. The display of mercy by God is not compelled in any way. Otherwise it is not mercy, as we saw in the previous study. But that does not mean that we cannot appeal to it. We can. Indeed, the Scriptures are full of such appeals. They even tell us that it is through appeals to mercy that mercy may be found.

Remember the tax collector in Jesus' story.

And remember the Pharisee in the same story, the one who was so highly regarded by those who knew him. The Pharisee was moral. He did not steal. He was not an adulterer. He tried to obey the law, even fasting twice a week and tithing all he possessed. But he was not moral enough to please God, and he had no sense of needing God's mercy. His prayer was not heard. He was not justified.

It was altogether different with the tax collector. He was a sinner, but even more important than that, he knew he was a sinner. So he did not come to God to remind God of his ethical attainments. He stood at a distance and would not even look up to heaven. Instead he beat his breast, a sign of genuine remorse or repentance, and prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus' judgment was that "this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:13-14). It is a judgment each of us needs very much to hear.

Do not try to catch me at this point, saying, "But if mercy has its basis in God's sovereign will, what good does it do to appeal to mercy? Doesn't the text say, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'?" That is absolutely true. Mercy is God's unique prerogative. But I will tell you who those are upon whom God has set his mercy. They are those who appeal to him on the basis of it. And I will tell you who those are who are elect. They are those who turn from their own self-sufficiency and trust Jesus.

How else can anyone know who God's elect are? In what way other than by faith are the children of God made known?

4. *We can proclaim God's mercy to others.* Can we proclaim him as sovereign? To be sure. As one who passes by those he has not chosen for salvation? That, too. But also as one who has mercy on whom he wills to have mercy and who has compassion on whom he wills to have compassion. God is a merciful God. There is nothing in the Bible that hinders me from saying that as clearly and as forcefully as I can. His very name is Mercy. And because his name is Mercy, I can assure you that if you will come believing on Jesus Christ, which is how he has made his mercy possible as well as known, you will find it. God has never turned a deaf ear to someone who asked for mercy. He has never rejected any person who has trusted in Christ Jesus.

> Come, every soul by sin oppressed, There's mercy with the Lord,
> And he will surely give you rest, By trusting in his Word.

Only trust him, only trust him, Only trust him now.
He will save you, he will save you, He will save you now.

Do you believe that? Will you come? If you believe it and if you will come, you will find God to be exactly what the Bible declares him to be: the merciful God who has reached out to save many through Jesus Christ. And you will be saved.

Chapter 131.
Salvation Is of the Lord

Romans 9:16

We are in a section of the Bible in which every sentence has exceptional importance. Because of this, we have been moving very slowly. In the last study we looked at Romans 9:15. In this study we look at verse 16.

Verse 16 can be considered an inference drawn from the truth in verse 15, which is a quotation from the Old Testament. If that is the case, the thought would be: If God has mercy on whom he wills to have mercy and shows compassion to whom he wills to show compassion, then salvation is of God who shows mercy and not of man. That is true enough. But it is probably better to see verse 16 as a statement of the truth behind the quotation. If this is the case, it means that salvation is not of man but of God; therefore, God shows mercy on whom he wills to show mercy and has compassion on whom he wills to have compassion.

This is better, because the chief point of verse 16 is the exclusion of any human role in salvation. The verse says, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Or as the King Tames Version has it, "So then it is not of him that willeth, not of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."

Today's Evangelism

This text has enormous implications for the way we do evangelism. In fact, it is a rebuke of most popular evangelism in our day.

You may recall from our studies of Romans 6 that when I was writing about sanctification in that context, I said that we tend to approach it in either of two wrong ways. Either we introduce a formula: "Follow these three [or four] steps to sound spiritual growth." Or we recommend an experience: "What you need is the baptism of the Holy Spirit [or meaningful worship or whatever]." I pointed out that neither of these is introduced by Paul. Rather, he bases his approach to sanctification on sound teaching. He tells us that we are to go on in the Christian life for the simple reason that we have become new creatures as the result of God's work in us, and we cannot go back to what we were.

The situation is exactly the same in most of our current approaches to evangelism. We choose either a formula or a feeling.

The formula represents something we must do: "Give your heart to Jesus," "Pray the sinner's prayer," "Hold up your hand and come forward," "Fill out this card." The feeling is something we try to work up in evangelistic services by certain kinds of music, moving stories, and emotional appeals.

Let me say that I do not doubt for a moment that God has sometimes used these methods and that he has sometimes worked through feelings, just as he has also sometimes used quite different things. The problem with these ways of doing evangelism is not that God has not occasionally been gracious enough to use them, but that they distort the truth about salvation by making it something we do or to which we can contribute and thus, to that degree, detract from the glory of God.

Besides, these approaches contradict our text, which says that salvation "does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

These approaches are also ineffective, as we would expect them to be, for they have filled our churches with thousands of people who think they are saved because they have made a profession or come forward at

a meeting, but who are not born again. In many cases, those who have done these things are not even any longer present in the churches.

The Negative Teaching

Romans 9:16 contains both negative and positive teaching, each of which is meant to be comprehensive. Negatively, we are told that salvation does not come by man's desire or effort, that is, neither by his will nor by his personal attainments. Positively, we are told that salvation comes from God.

The words *desire* and *effort* are meant to include everything of which a human being may be capable, and they thus reduce everyone to the position of being saved by the mercy of God or not saved. The first word concerns volition. The second refers to active exertion. Specifically they deny that we are saved by "seeking God" or "wanting to be saved" or, to run with the other term, by "choosing Jesus," "surrendering our lives to Jesus," "taking Jesus into our hearts," or doing anything else of which we may think ourselves to be capable. It is true that there is a faith to be exercised, a choice to be made, a life to be surrendered, and seeking to be done. But those are the result of God's working in us according to his mercy, and not the conditions on which he does.

Robert Haldane wrote rightly, "It is true, indeed, that believers both will and run, but this is the *effect,* not the *cause,* of the grace of God being vouchsafed to them." I know there are objections, some of them scriptural.

"What about John 1:12?" says someone. "Doesn't that verse say, 'To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God'?" It does, of course. But the answer to the implied objection—that we become born again as the result of our receiving Jesus—is found in the next verse, which describes those who are saved as "children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (v. 13). That fixes the sequence rightly, just as Paul has expressed it in Romans 8, Ephesians 1

and 2, and elsewhere: first, election; then, rebirth; third, faith accompanied by repentance; and lastly, adoption into the family of God along with other benefits.

Together, John 1:12 and 13 actually teach that "it does not... depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

Another verse that some people will quote is Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth,
Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Then they ask, "Doesn't that teach that we have to give our hearts to Jesus and then confess him as Lord to be saved? Doesn't it mean that we are the ones who ultimately determine whether or not we will be saved? If we are saved, isn't it because we want to be saved? If we are lost, isn't it because we choose to be?"

Well, we know the mouth speaks what is in the heart. Jesus said, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34b). So the critical question is: What kind of a heart is it that confesses, "Jesus is Lord"? Is this the new heart, which is given to us by God,—or the old, Adamic heart, which is enmity against God? It cannot be the latter, because the Bible everywhere teaches that the old heart is thoroughly corrupt. Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9). Ezekiel called it a "heart of stone" (Ezek. 11:19). Can a stony heart repent of its sin and come to God? Can a heart as wicked as this "choose" Jesus? Impossible! We can no more change our hearts than a leopard can change its spots.

Therefore, if we are to repent and believe the gospel, we must be given a new heart. A "heart of flesh" is Ezekiel's term for it. This heart is given to us by the new birth. It is this heart only that believes on Jesus.

The Positive Teaching

This brings us to the positive teaching of this verse, namely, that salvation is entirely of God. God has mercy on whom he wills to have

mercy, and he shows compassion on whom he wills to show compassion.

I have titled this study "Salvation Is of the Lord," which comes, as I am sure you realize, from the Old Testament. It is from the story of Jonah, from chapter 2, and I refer to this now because Jonah is a good illustration of our text in Romans, namely, that salvation "does not... depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." The story of Jonah is a story of God's mercy from beginning to end: mercy to the sailors, mercy to the people of Nineveh, and, above all, mercy to Jonah. Moreover, as far as man's desire or effort is concerned, not only did Jonah not desire God's will or strive to do it, he actually willed and tried to do the opposite. He tried to run away from God as deliberately as he could.

Jonah was a prophet, and God came to him with a command to proclaim a message of judgment on Nineveh, the capital of Assyria: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). We would have expected Jonah to be responsive to such a call at once. Instead, "Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish" (v. 3a). Scholars debate the location of this ancient city, but most believe it was on the far coast of Spain beyond the Rock of Gibraltar. This fits the story, of course, for it means that Jonah was so determined to resist God's sovereign call that he set out in precisely the opposite direction and for a destination as far away as possible. God said, "Go east. "Jonah went west, as far west as anyone knew to go. If he went farther than that, he would presumably have fallen off the edge of the world, which is, in a sense, what happened to him.

Why did Jonah disobey God? Strangely, at the end of the story, we find him explaining that it was because he suspected that God was going to be merciful to these people (Jonah 4:2)—and he did not want that, because they were the enemies of his people. No one can successfully run away from God, however. So, although Jonah went west instead of

east, God went after him and brought him back. The text says that God hurled a great storm after Jonah.

At this point the mariners come into the story, for the judgment on the disobedient prophet affected them, too, and they were soon in as much danger of drowning from the fierce gale as Jonah was. They were pagans, but they had some spiritual perception and understood that the storm was unusually fierce, supernaturally so, in fact; they reasoned that some powerful god was angry with one or more of them. When they drew straws to find out who it was, the lot fell on Jonah.

Jonah understood that God had found him out and was now exposing his disobedience. He confessed what he was doing. But he was still unrepentant. He had that "heart of stone" Ezekiel had written about. So, when the sailors asked what they should do to him to make the sea calm down for them, Jonah replied, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (v. 12).

I like to point out that Jonah did not know that God had prepared a great fish to swallow him and eventually return him back to land. So, if he was asking to be thrown overboard in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, it meant that he was willing to be drowned. It meant that in his heart he was still unrepentant, for he was saying, "I would rather die than submit to God's will." That is what it means to have a hard heart. It is what every one of us has until God replaces it.

Was Jonah a genuine believer at this point? Good question! I used to say he was. We would expect it of a prophet. If he was, he is an example of how stubbornly disobedient some Christians are with God, at least for a time. Today, however, I am not so sure. It is clear that Jonah was not right with God, and his is more an example of an unregenerate heart than a regenerate one. At any rate, Jonah seems to have experienced what we would call a conversion inside the great fish, which is where the verse "Salvation comes from the LORD" occurs

(Jonah 2:9). What happened inside Jonah while he was inside the fish is the heart of this great story.

Prayer from the Depths

When Jonah was turning his back on God to go to Tarshish, it did not bother him at all that he was abandoning God. But suddenly, when he was thrown overboard to his death and found himself in the position of apparently being abandoned by God, and Jonah actually calls his condition hellish, saying, "From the depths of the grave [that is, from *Sheol*] I called for help" (Jonah 2:2). As the story shows, God had not abandoned Jonah. But Jonah thought he had, and his despair was the very first step in his conversion.

What Jonah did in that great fish was to pray. God brought him to that point. As he prayed, he discovered that God was using the very depths of his misery to show him mercy.

Jonah's prayer has four characteristics of all true prayer, and these have bearing on the question of correct biblical evangelism, which is where we started.

1. *He was honest.* The first thing we notice about Jonah's prayer is that it was honest. That is, his disobedience had gotten him into a mess, and he acknowledged it. Before we get to this point, when God is working in our lives, we tend to explain away the hard hand of God's judgments. We tell ourselves that we are only having a temporary setback, that things will get better, that they are not as bad as they seem. But when God begins to get through to us, the first thing that happens is that we admit our misery and desperate circumstances for what they are. Moreover, we admit that God has caused them. This is what Jonah does. You hear it in his prayer.

You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers swept over me.
I said, "I have been banished from your sight;
yet I will look again toward your holy temple."

Jonah 2:3-4

To acknowledge that God was behind his misfortune increased his terror, for it was not the sailors or even mere circumstances he was fighting. It was God. God had summoned Jonah to trial, cast a verdict of "guilty" against his sinful prophet, and sentenced him to death. This is a terror almost beyond words! But, in another sense, the acknowledgement of God's hand in his misery also provided comfort. For God is merciful, and it is always better to fall into the hands of God, even the angry God, than of men.

It is often in judgment that mercy may be found.

2. *He repented.* The second characteristic of Jonah's prayer is a spirit of repentance. We see it in two ways. First, he acknowledged that what had happened to him, while caused by God, was nevertheless his own fault. This is the meaning of verse 8, where Jonah says, "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs." An idol is anything that takes the place of God. So Jonah is confessing that he had rejected God, just as surely as those who literally worship idols. Therefore, he had renounced the source of all mercy.

The second way we know Jonah was genuinely repentant is that he does not ask God for anything. If he had, we might suspect that he was repenting only to get something from God. That is, he would have been treating his repentance as a good work that somehow was supposed to put God in his debt. Salvation does not come that way. Remember: Deserving something and receiving mercy are two entirely different things. Jonah knew now that all he deserved was damnation. Therefore, he was willing to wait upon the mercy of God, if it should come, without demanding anything.

3. *He was thankful.* "Thankful?" we might ask. "From the belly of a fish? Only a few hours or days away from death? What could Jonah possibly be thankful about?" Well, if we continue to think of his plight in physical terms, there probably is no good answer. But it is vastly different if we think spiritually. True, Jonah had no hope of any bodily deliverance. But he had found the grace of God. His entire prayer shows he had. His word for what he had found is "salvation" (v.

9).

This is the greatest miracle of the book. Not the great fish. Not the storm. The greatest miracle is Jonah's salvation.

4. *He was willing to take his position alongside the ungodly, all of whom need salvation by the mercy of God only.* The final characteristic of this prayer is likewise significant. For when Jonah prayed, as he did at the end, "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will *sacrifice* to you. What I have *vowed* I will make good" (v. 9, emphasis added), he was promising to do exactly what the pagan mariners had been willing to do, and did do, in the previous chapter. When they saw the power and holiness of Jonah's God, "They offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him" (Jonah 1:16). It was right that they should. But here, in the second chapter, Jonah is taking his place alongside of them.

Earlier he had said, "I don't want to preach to pagans. I am a Jew. I want God to judge the pagans." But now, after he had discovered how much he deserved God's judgment himself, he was willing to come to God as the mariners came—as a suppliant seeking mercy.

"Jesus Saves"

I have two final points. The first is a restatement of the truth that salvation is by the mercy of God and is without conditions.

What conditions could there be? Robert Haldane asks that question and answers with a telling paragraph:

Is it faith? Faith is the *gift* of God. Is it repentance? Christ is exalted as a Prince and a Savior to *give* repentance. Is it love? God promises to circumcise the heart in order to *love* him. Are they good works? His people are the workmanship of God created unto *good works.* Is it perseverance to the end? They are *kept* by the power of God through faith unto salvation.... "Thy people," saith Jehovah to the Messiah, "shall be willing in the day of thy power." Thus the believer, in running his race, and working out his salvation, is actuated by God and animated by the consideration of his all-powerful operation in the beginning of his course, of the continuation of his support during its progress, and by the assurances that it shall be effectual in enabling him to overcome all obstacles and to arrive in safety at the termination.

Second, what does this say about the proper way to do evangelism, the point with which I started?

Well, the weaknesses of our contemporary evangelism have been recognized and critiqued by many, among them Walter J. Chantry, Ernest C. Reisinger, and Gordon H. Clark, all of whom have written things that have been helpful to me. As I have read their books, I have found that there is a common bottom line. Evangelism is to teach the Word of God. Not just a certain evangelistic core, or only certain doctrines, or only truths that will move or motivate the ungodly.

It is to teach the Bible and to do this as carefully, consistently, and comprehensively as possible, while looking to God (and praying to God) to give new life. Gordon Clark expressed it by saying quite succinctly, "Evangelism is the exposition of the Scripture. God will do the regenerating." "Just preach Jesus!" someone says.

Did I hear, "Just preach *Jesus*"?

Let's do it. But remember what Jesus means. Jesus means "Salvation is of the Lord," the very words uttered by Jonah from the belly of the fish. To preach Jesus is to preach a Calvinistic gospel.

Chapter 132.

God's Power Displayed in Judgment

Romans 9:17-18

We have been swimming through some deep doctrinal waters in the last few studies of Romans 9, but we have also had a few mild ripples of application. In the previous study, much of what we examined had bearing on some of the ways we do evangelism.

So, let me pick up at that point and ask a question about evangelism that will be a bridge to what we are to look at now, namely, the display of God's power and justice in his judgments. The question is: What is the ultimate goal of evangelism? We all know what evangelism is. It is telling others about Jesus. Or, if we want to fill that out a bit, evangelism is the proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, so that those who hear might respond in faith, join with God's other children in the fellowship of the church, and continue growing in Christ as his disciples. But is that the ultimate goal of evangelism? Is it merely to get people saved?

To take another line of thought, at the end of the last study I defined evangelism as the exposition of Scripture. Is that the ultimate goal? Simply to teach the Word of God?

Of course, the important word in my question is the word *ultimate.* For, although the other goals I mentioned are legitimate goals—to teach the Word of God and to see people converted—what I am trying to point out here is that those goals are not ultimate. The ultimate goal is to glorify God, and the reason for that is that the glorification of God is the chief goal of everything, of life, history, creation, and our own existence. The first question of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What is the chief end of man?" It answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." The goal of life is God's glory. So that is evangelism's chief end, too.

Let's ask it as a question: "What is the chief end of evangelism?" The answer would be:

"Evangelism's chief end is to glorify God."

But, in the case of evangelism, that happens in two ways: (1) The grace and mercy of God are glorified in the saving of those who will be saved, and (2) The justice and power of God are glorified in the case of those who are not saved, but are instead judged for their sins.

And that is what brings us to our text: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:17-18). These verses teach that the power of God is made known in his judgments, just as his mercy is made known in saving those to whom he wills to show mercy.

"The Scripture Says"

Before we tackle that, however, we need to look at the unusual way in which Paul's quotation from the Old Testament is introduced. The quotation is from Exodus 9:16, and God is speaking. God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." But Paul did not write, "God said...." He wrote, "The Scripture says to Pharaoh...." This is particularly unusual because the Scriptures did not even exist at that time.

Why did Paul write, "The Scripture says..."?

One of the great theological works of this century is a book by former Princeton Theological
Seminary Professor of Theology Benjamin B. Warfield (died 1921), titled *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible.* It contains ten classic studies on the Bible's nature and authority, and one of them is on the phrase "Scripture says" and others like it. The chapter is entitled, "'It says:' 'Scripture says:' 'God says.'" In this chapter Warfield looked at a number of Bible passages in which, on the one hand, the Scriptures are

spoken of as if they are God and, on the other hand, God is spoken of as if he is the Scriptures. I quote Warfield:

Examples of the first class of passages are such as these: Galatians 3:8, "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3); Romans 9:17, "The Scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up" (Exod. 9:16). It was not, however, the Scripture (which did not exist at the time) that, foreseeing God's purposes of grace in the future, spoke these precious words to Abraham, but God himself in his own person. It was not the not yet existent Scripture that made this announcement to Pharaoh, but God himself through the mouth of his prophet Moses. These acts could be attributed to "Scripture" only as the result of such a habitual identification, in the mind of the writer, of the text of Scripture with God as speaking, that it became natural to use the term "Scripture says," when what was really intended was "God, as recorded in Scripture, said."

Examples of the other class of passages are such as these: Matthew 19:4, 5, "And he answered and said, Have ye not read that he which made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the twain shall become one flesh?" (Gen. 2:24); Hebrews 3:7, "Wherefore, even as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye shall hear his voice," etc. (Ps. 95:7).... It is not God, however, in whose mouth these sayings are placed in the text of the Old Testament: they are the words of others, recorded in the text of Scripture as spoken to or of God. They could be attributed to God only through such habitual identification, in the minds of the writers, of the text of Scripture with the utterances of God that it had become natural to use the term "God says" when what was really intended was "Scripture, the Word of God, says."

The two sets of passages, together, thus show an absolute identification, in the minds of these writers, of "Scripture" with the speaking God.

In that volume Warfield was trying to counter modern attempts to lower the authority of Scripture, making it a mere word of man about God rather than God's inerrant word to man. As he showed, the words *Scripture says,* which begin our text, are an important part of the argument leading to a right view. But this is also important for what Paul is saying in Romans. For, in my judgment, this is not just an unconscious way of mixing God and Scripture, though Warfield's handling of the text for his purpose might suggest it. It is actually Paul's way of calling attention to the authority of Scripture on the point he is making.

Robert Haldane says, "By the manner in which the apostle begins this verse, we are taught that whatever the Scriptures declare on any subject is to be considered decisive on the point." And that is important, because what Paul is saying in Romans 9 is authoritative, though it is hard for many people to accept it.

Examination of the Text

This brings us back to the thought of Romans 9:17-18, which we must now examine briefly. We remember that Paul has been arguing the fact of God's election, that he chose some out of Israel to be saved and that he chose some not to be. He proved it in the case of Abraham, Abraham's son Isaac, and Isaac's son Esau. Paul then raised this question: Is God unjust in so operating? He answered: "Not at all!? Then, in verse 15, he proved his denial by quoting from the Old Testament, the acknowledged authority. The quotation is from Exodus 33:19, in which God said, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." That led to the conclusion: "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

The verses we are studying are exactly parallel to that first quotation and conclusion, only they are illustrating the negative side of God's action, namely, wrath and judgment, instead of the positive side. Romans 9:15 began with the word *for:* "For he [that is, God] says to Moses...." So also does verse 17: "For the Scripture says...." Then, after

the Old Testament proof is cited, our section also gives a conclusion, which is parallel to verse 16: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (v. 18).

So, on the one hand, we have God making his mercy known through saving some, like Moses, and, on the other hand, making his power known by judging others. In the latter case, Pharaoh is the Old Testament example.

The exact sense of this emerges when we turn to Exodus. The first six plagues on Egypt have already taken place, and God is now sending Moses back to Pharaoh to say that the seventh, an even more terrible plague, is coming. The first six plagues have been as mild as they have been not because God was unable to deal more harshly. He could have destroyed Pharaoh and all the Egyptians from the start. Rather, God says, he has spared Pharaoh this long so the full range of his power might be known. Here is how it reads: "For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exod. 9:15-16).

That is exactly what happened, of course. With each phase of the king's resistance, the force of the judgments increased; and with each raising of the ante, God's power became more visible and his powerful and sovereign name was more widely blazed forth.

The point of these chapters is that God raised Pharaoh to his high position of prominence and sustained him in it through the earlier plagues, so God might be glorified in his power. Paul's point in quoting the text is that God both acts this way and is right in so doing.

We need to remember from our earlier discussion of reprobation that God's raising Pharaoh to this position does not mean that he made him sin. Pharaoh sinned because he chose to sin, and he resisted God and hardened his heart because it is the nature of sinners to resist God and the nature of sin to harden hearts. But, having noted that, we must not

deny that the text also says that God chose to deal with Pharaoh this way because he wished to show his power in judgment to the world through him. God was under no obligation to save Pharaoh, as he saved the
Israelites, and he was not unjust in choosing him as the one in whom his justice and power would be known. I summarize this in three statements:

1. God is not responsible for the sin of men and women, and he passes by those he has chosen not to save, after the fact of their sin rather than before.
2. God retains the freedom to save whom he will and judge whom he will.
3. In both cases his name is glorified.

Jonathan Edwards on Romans 9:18

I know that this does not sound very much like evangelism to most people. In fact, although I have said that evangelism is expounding Scripture, even sections of the Bible like Romans 9, many will wonder how it is possible to find a gospel message in such doctrines. I remind you, however, that the most powerful time of gospel preaching this country has ever seen was during the Great Awakening under such preachers as Jonathan Edwards, and that it was carried forward precisely by such teachings.

As you might expect, Jonathan Edwards himself had a sermon on this text. It was one of his great ones. Would you like to know how he handled it?

Most Puritan sermons were in three parts: (1) exposition, (2) doctrine, and (3) application. Edwards follows this pattern, though here, as in many of his other sermons, he does not spend much time on exposition, treating it rather as his introduction. He simply traces Paul's argument in this chapter, showing that God deals with people in different ways,

showing mercy to some and hardening others, and that the basis of this is nothing other than his sovereign will and pleasure.

The doctrine section is much longer. It has four parts:

1. *What is God's sovereignty?* Edwards describes God's sovereignty as "his absolute,

independent right of disposing of all creatures according to his own pleasure." His explanation of what this means is that God is under no constraints from any source, under no obligation to conform to another's will, and without any obligation to anyone for anything.

2. *What God's sovereignty in the salvation of men implies.* It implies, Edwards says, that "God can either bestow salvation on any of the children of men, or refuse it, without any prejudice to the glory of any of his attributes." In particular, his saving of some does no dishonor to his holiness, majesty, justice, or truth, for he saves them through the work of Christ, whose death for sinners upholds these attributes. God's condemnation of others does no dishonor to his righteousness, goodness, or faithfulness, because he is under no obligation to them.

3. *God actually does exercise his sovereignty in men's salvation.* This is the chief point I have been making in my exposition, but Edwards elaborates by showing the many ways God does this: in choosing one nation or individual rather than another; in giving some great spiritual advantages not given to others; in sometimes saving the low and disadvantaged and denying salvation to the wise and great; in bestowing salvation upon some who have had few advantages; in calling to salvation some who have been particularly wicked and passing by the righteous and moral; in saving some who have sought salvation but not others who also seem to have sought it.

4. *The reason for this exercise.* The reason Edwards gives is the chief point of Romans 9:17-18, namely, to display his glory in each of his many attributes. "It is the will of God to manifest his

> sovereignty. And his sovereignty, like his other attributes, is manifested in the exercise of it. He glorifies his power in the exercise of his power. He glorifies his mercy in the exercise of his mercy. So he glorifies his sovereignty in the exercise of his sovereignty."

He closes the doctrinal section by quoting verse 18: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

The last part of Jonathan Edwards's sermon is the application section, and it is for this that I have chiefly summarized his message. Edwards gives five points of application:

1. *From this we learn how absolutely we are dependent on God in this great matter of the eternal salvation of our souls.* We are not only dependent on God's wisdom and power in being able to devise a way to save us and then actually doing so. We are also dependent on his will to save us, for it is only due to the sheer good pleasure of his will that he saves anyone. Why should he save human beings and not the fallen angels? Why should some people be saved and not others? Why

is it that some should have the advantages of possessing the Bible, being exposed to the ordinances of religion and being able to hear fine preaching, while others have none of these things?

2. *We should adore the absolute sovereignty of God with great humility.* This divine freedom to choose some and pass by others is the very essence of the divine glory. So we should give him that glory. "It is impossible that we should go to excess in lowliness and reverence of that Being who may dispose of us to all eternity, as he pleases."

3. *If you are saved, you are to attribute it to sovereign grace alone and give all praise to God who alone makes you differ from another.* When you hear of another's open sin, you should think of how wicked you once were, how you provoked God by your

rejection of his grace, and how he saved you in spite of your sin, according to his own good pleasure.

4. *Learn how much cause you have to admire the grace of God, which has stooped to save you.* Specifically, the utterly, unbound, unconstrained, free and sovereign God has stooped to bind himself to you by a covenant, expressed in solemn promises.

God insists that his sovereignty be acknowledged by us. He will not have it any other way. Yet
"this is the stumbling-block on which thousands fall and perish; and if we go on contending with God about his sovereignty, it will be our eternal ruin. It is absolutely necessary that we should submit to God, as our absolute sovereign and the sovereign over our souls, as one who may have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and harden whom he will."

5. *We may make use of this doctrine to guard those who seek salvation from two opposing extremes—presumption and discouragement.* Says Edwards:

Do not presume upon the mercy of God, and so encourage yourself in sin. Many hear that God's mercy is infinite and therefore think that, if they delay seeking salvation for the present and seek it hereafter, that God will bestow his grace upon them. But consider that, though God's grace is sufficient, yet he is sovereign and will use his own pleasure whether to save you or not. If you put off salvation till hereafter [later], salvation will not be in your power. It will be as a sovereign God pleases, whether you shall obtain it or not. Seeing, therefore, that in this affair you are absolutely dependent on God, it is best to follow his direction in seeking it, which is to hear his voice today: "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart."

Beware also of discouragement. Take heed of despairing thoughts, because you are a great sinner, because you have persevered so long in sin, have backslidden, and resisted the Holy Ghost. Remember that, let your case be what it may and you ever so great a sinner,... God can

bestow mercy upon you without the least prejudice to the honor of his holiness, which you have offended, or to the honor of his majesty, which you have insulted, or of his justice, which you have made your enemy, or of his truth, or any of his attributes. Let you be what sinner you may, God can, if he pleases, greatly glorify himself in your salvation.

Brothers and sisters, that is the way to do evangelism. It is not what the hard hearts of sinners want to hear. They want to be told that God owes them something, or at least that their destinies are in their own hands. But even if they hate and heap scorn on these doctrines, that in itself may be a beginning in the matter of their salvation. For it shows that they have at least understood the truth, though they may still be rejecting it. And they cannot accept it until they understand it.

Fight against it as you wish, it is still truth: God will be glorified in your destiny one way or another, in your salvation or in your eternal damnation. But if you have begun to see that, it may be an important first step in the surrender of your own will and great pride, and the discovery of God's mercy in Christ, which is the only thing that has ever saved anyone.

Chapter 133.
The Potter and the Clay

Romans 9:19-21

The human heart is a deceitful but very resourceful thing, and two ways it expresses these characteristics are by dismissing God, on the one hand, or blaming him, on the other.

Quite a few years ago, my wife and I had a neighbor who seemed to have no interest in God. She had very little morality, was unfaithful to her husband and often boasted about it, explaining to me on one occasion how she was able to squeeze some of her affairs into her lunch hour. But then one day she discovered that her husband was having an

affair, too, and she was devastated. The marriage ended in divorce. This woman came to me when she found out about her husband's affair because I was a pastor, probably the only one she knew. She had not been thinking of God before this, but now she abruptly brought God into the picture.

"Why is God doing this to me?" was her question. She considered God to be terribly unfair.

Who's to Blame?

This is the kind of thinking Paul is dealing with in Romans 9:19-21, as he continues to teach about the sovereignty of God in salvation. In the first half of the chapter, he has been arguing that in the matter of salvation God operates by the principles of election and reprobation, and he has answered the question: Is God just in so operating? He has shown that God is just, since God owes mankind nothing, salvation is by grace, and God rightly demonstrates all aspects of his glory, including his wrath and power as well as his mercy and grace, by so doing. But now the wicked resourcefulness of the human heart, which I mentioned, comes in. For, if a person cannot deny God's sovereignty over human affairs and human destinies or even God's right to save some and pass by others, as God does, the person will at least try to deny his or her own responsibility in the matter.

So a new question arises: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" (v. 19).

This, of course, is a major theological question: the relationship between the sovereignty of God and free will. It is a question that can be answered and has been, particularly by Jonathan Edwards in his treatise on "The Freedom of the Will." But Paul does not answer the question here, at least not directly. And the reason he does not answer it is that he already has.

For this objection to have weight, the person making it must assume that God determines to condemn some persons without reference to what they are or do as sinners. It assumes that he creates some people only to damn them, to send them to hell, and that they are passive in the

matter. But that is not what Paul has been saying. Nor is it what I have been saying as I have tried to trace out his teaching. Reprobation means "passing by" or "choosing not to save." And those whom God passes by or chooses not to save are not innocent persons but sinners who are in rebellion against him. God does not condemn innocent people. He condemns sinners only. But God does have the right to save or not to save sinners, as he chooses.

So the question is really an objection to God's right to do what he does, which is what has been under consideration all along and which is why I have said that Paul has already answered it.

Not all commentators have seen this. J. C. O'Neill writes that "The objection is entirely warranted, and the reply does nothing to answer it." C. H. Dodd calls this "the weakest point in the whole epistle." But Paul has given answers, and he knows that the objection really rises out of the rebellion of the heart against God's sovereignty. In fact, the very question is rebellion. For the query "Who resists his will?" is itself resistance. Human beings are sinners, are guilty, and they prove it even by the way they ask their questions. Therefore, Paul answers by reiterating once more that God has a right to do with his (sinful) creatures as he will.

The outline of these three verses is straightforward. Verse 19 states the question. Verse 20 provides the answer. Verse 21 illustrates the answer by a picture drawn from the Old Testament.

Three Humbling Contrasts

We have already looked at the question. The answer (v. 20) and the illustration (v. 21) provide contrasts that are intended to put the question in its proper perspective and ourselves in our proper place. There are three of them.

1. *Man and God.* The first contrast is more apparent in the Greek text than in English, for the verse begins with the words "O man" and ends with the words "the God." Yet it is apparent enough in

English. You and I are mere men and women set over against the God who made not only us but all things. It is ludicrous for creatures as small, ignorant, impotent, and sinful as we are to question the propriety of God's moral acts. We may not understand what God is doing in any particular case. In fact, most of the time we will not, because "'my thoughts are not your thoughts, / neither are your ways my ways,' / declares the LORD" (Isa. 55:8). We can ask God to explain what he is doing, if he will. But for us to suggest that he is wrong in what he does is patently absurd.

2. *What is formed and he who formed it.* The contrast between man and God, the first, stresses the insignificance of one and the greatness of the other. This second contrast brings in another matter, namely, that we are mere creatures—God is the Creator—and therefore everything we are and have comes from him, including even our ability to ask such questions.

Robert Haldane is particularly wise in the way he deals with this matter. "Any wisdom the creature possesses must have been received from the Creator; and if the Creator has the power of forming rational beings, must he not himself be infinite in wisdom? And does it not insult the Creator to pretend to find imperfection in his proceedings?... The reason and discernment between right and wrong which he [man] possesses is the gift of God; it must, then, be the greatest abuse of these faculties to employ them to question the conduct of him who gave them."

Once again, we must stress that "Paul does not here speak of the right of God over his creatures as creatures, but as sinful creatures, as he himself clearly intimates in the next verses."

3. *The clay and the potter.* Each of these three contrasts says the same thing. But each also adds a new element, and the new element here is the authority of the Old Testament, since the illustration of the potter and clay is drawn from the Old Testament and shows that the principle involved is a point of revelation. There are four main passages in which the illustration of the potter and the clay is

found in the Old Testament, three in Isaiah and one in Jeremiah. It is good to have them before us.

You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"?
Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"?

Isaiah 29:16

Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground.
Does the clay say to the potter,
"What are you making?"

Isaiah 45:9a

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Isaiah 64:8 The best-known passage is in Jeremiah:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

"Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'"

Jeremiah
18:1-11

As far as anyone can tell, Paul does not seem to be quoting specifically from any one of these texts. But the points in Romans are exactly what these verses in the Old Testament also say: (1) It is absurd for a mere man or woman to fault God. (2) God has absolute sovereignty over his creatures, saving whom he will and condemning whom he will. (3) This is not an arbitrary selection, since his judgments are based on his justice in condemning sin. (4) Therefore, "turn from your evil ways... and reform your ways and your actions."

What could be more reasonable than that? Thus, instead of objecting to God's actions, we should fear them and allow our fear of judgment to drive us to the repentance we need.

A Plea for Sound Thinking

In the previous study I included a summary of Jonathan Edwards's untitled sermon on Romans 9:18, showing how he preached evangelistically even from such an apparently harsh text. At this point I want to follow the "application" portion of another sermon of Edwards, though in this case the text he is treating is not from Romans 9 but from Romans 3:19: "That every mouth may be stopped" (KJV). I introduce it here, because silencing the objections of sinners to the justice of God in condemning them for their sin is precisely what Paul is getting at in our text. Edwards's sermon is entitled, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners."

The application is an appeal to right thinking. It asks: If God should reject and destroy you, would that not be appropriate, considering how you have behaved toward both God and others?

1. *"If God should forever cast you off, it would be exactly agreeable to your treatment of him."*

Instead of using the brains God gave you to try to fault God, which is the most foolish of all things to do, you should apply them to right thinking, and the first point of right thinking is to examine how you have treated God. You do not stand up very well under such a direct examination.

To begin with, you have not shown any particular affection or love toward God. When people are in love, they think of the loved one constantly and want to be with that person and are always thinking of what they can do for the object of their love. But you have not done that. You do not think often of God. In fact, you think of him hardly at all, except to blame him when things do not go exactly as you would like. You do not want to be with God. You do not go to church often or spend much time in prayer or Bible study. You do not try always to be doing something for God. If you have not shown any particular affection or love toward God, why should God be obliged to love you? Why should he be obliged to show you any favor whatsoever?

Again, you have slighted God in thousands of ways throughout your entire life. Everything you are and have comes from God. But you have not been thankful for it. Nor have you made any serious effort to find out why God has given you the abilities, advantages, and opportunities you have been given. You have used these things for yourself, trying to accumulate as much money or pleasure or praise as possible, without any thought of him. Why should God pay attention to you in any saving way when you are negligent of his bountiful gifts and favors?

You have also refused to hear God's calls to you, even though they have come to you many times and in a variety of ways. You have heard the gospel preached. You have read the Good News. You possess a Bible. You have even seen dramatic tellings of the gospel story. Has God never spoken to you, calling you from sin to Christ by these means? Have you never felt your heart moved, your will challenged by these truths? Some in some parts of the world have not received these calls,

but you have received them again and again, and still you turn a deaf ear in God's direction. You will not hear him. Why should he hear you, even if you should cry out to him in grief and desperation at the last day?

2. "*If you should forever be cast off by God, it would be agreeable to your treatment of Jesus Christ."*

But it is not only God the Father whom you have rejected. You have also despised the work of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. It would have been just of God if he had rejected you outright without ever having offered you a Savior. But God has not done that. He has provided a Savior, even Jesus Christ, the most wonderful, the most holy, the most merciful, the most gracious person who has ever walked on the surface of this earth. The Father offered him up to death in the place of sinners such as yourself. But you don't care for that. You care only for your own pleasure. You ignore Jesus completely, at least in all practical ways. If he were here in person to confront you in your sinful behavior and tell you to repent of it, you would, if the truth be told, easily find yourself in a crowd, like that of his own day, crying out to Pilate for his blood.

If God should cast you off forever, wouldn't that be the most just and reasonable thing in the world in light of your treatment of Jesus Christ?

3. "*If God should forever cast you off and destroy you, it would be agreeable to your treatment of others."*

The one thing even sinful human beings find it easy to believe in is fair play, doing to others as they have done to you. And we acknowledge a certain poetic justice when a person who cheats another gets cheated or a bully gets beaten or a thief gets put in jail. You think like that, and you are even so arrogant as to believe that this is how you would like to be treated by Almighty God. But what if he should treat you as you have treated others? You know that sin hurts and destroys, yet you have not been content to sin alone. You have involved others in your sins. And if

you have been unable to do that with some particular person—if he or she has resisted your advances or disagreed with your lies or disengaged from your evil schemes—you have been quick to speak against the person for possessing the morality you despise.

And even in that you are harming others. For your example is harmful, even when you do not think about it much, as you probably do not. Fathers, your examples have harmed your children. Mothers, your sins have left their dark stains on your offspring. Young people, your immorality and your lack of any true seeking after God have damaged your friends and peers.

Why does God owe you the favor of salvation when you have been so evil, irresponsible, and harmful in your treatment of other people? If you want justice, would it not be just for God to treat you as you have treated them?

4. "*If God should eternally cast you off, it would but be agreeable to your own behavior toward yourself*"

I will not say that you are able to save yourself. You cannot. But you have failed to do even what you can do. There are many sins from which you could have refrained but have embraced instead. There are many steps toward God that you could have taken, but you have turned away. Indeed, like Jonah, you have run in the opposite direction. You cannot convert yourself, but you can place yourself where a conversion is most likely to happen, if God should be pleased to do it. You can read his Word; you can pursue it diligently. You can seek the company of those who know God and speak often of him.

Is God obliged to take better care of you than you are willing to take of yourself? Neither your responsibility toward God nor your legitimate interest in your eternal welfare has been enough for you to put God and spiritual things before your passing pleasures. Is God obliged to do any differently for you? Why should he seek your welfare, when you yourself will not seek it and, in fact, actually pursue your own destruction willingly?

After presenting a lengthy application of his text along these lines, Edwards concludes, "Thus I have proposed some things to your consideration which, if you are not exceeding blind, senseless, and perverse, will stop your mouth and convince you that you stand justly condemned before God."

The Day of Grace

Yet God's purpose is not solely to condemn. The demonstration of his power and justice in judging sinners is a true part of what God is doing in human history, but it is not the whole thing. God is also making known the riches of his glory in the salvation of some, as these verses, particularly the next verses, show. Why should you not be among those who are saved? Particularly since you are hearing these very truths proclaimed?

If all God wanted to do was send people to hell, he would not have needed to tell us these things or anything else. There would have been no need for a Bible, no need for preachers to preach or messengers to explain and teach it, no need for a Savior to be held forth as the heart of the Bible's message. If all God wanted to do was let us go to hell, all he would have needed to have done is nothing. We are capable of rushing off to hell, like lemmings running down a hillside, entirely by ourselves. But God has not done that. He has provided a Savior. He has given us a Bible. He has sent messengers, and their message, like that of all true prophets sent by God is: "Repent, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Turn from your sin now. Today God is setting the way of salvation before you."

You cannot bring God under obligation to save you by anything you might do, and indeed you have not done anything significant. But the way he saves people is by the preaching and teaching of his Word, which is what you have just received, and by the power of his Spirit working through it.

If what you have heard has made sense to you, if you know that God does not owe you anything, that you have actually spurned what good

he has shown you, and that all you actually deserve from him is judgment, then God is already using his Word to bring about the needed transformation of your heart. Now, instead of trying to tell him that what he does is unjust, you will wisely and rationally seek his mercy through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, where alone it may be found.

Chapter 134.
The Patience of God

Romans 9:22-24

What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God," answers *The Westminster Shorter Catechism.* But we might also say that the chief end of *God* is to glorify God, that is, to be God. In an earlier chapter we saw that it is right or just for God to do this. In Romans 9:22-24, we are to study how he does it.

These verses speak of five of God's attributes: wrath, power, patience, glory, and mercy (vv. 22-
23). Two of these have just been mentioned: power in verse 16 and mercy in verses 15, 16, and 18. Two others, wrath and glory, were introduced earlier in the letter. The new and unexpected attribute in these verses is patience, which Paul declares has been shown to "the objects of his [God's] wrath—prepared for destruction." The verses teach that God's treatment of the wicked is neither arbitrary nor meaningless, but is intended rather to make his wrath, power, and patience known, just as, on the other hand, his treatment of those who are chosen to be saved displays his mercy.

In both cases the glory of God is achieved by God's exercising or making known these attributes.

Some Grammatical Problems

These verses are a bit difficult, however. So we begin by looking at the difficulties. They are grammatical.

The first difficulty is that the passage begins with the word *if*. "If always introduces a dependent clause, which should be followed by a major or independent clause. But in this case there is none. So the first part of the sentence, which extends as far as verse 24, is left hanging. The technical term for this situation is an anacoluthon. Probably we are to provide an ending mentally. Since the next word is "but," we might be supposed to think of the verse as saying, "But if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath,... *what objection can you possibly have?*" Or "... *why complain about injustice?"*

The New International Version seems to encourage this kind of mental addition by translating the opening words "What if...?" But still, this is a bit conjectural.

The next word is also a problem. It is translated "choosing" by the NIV, but it is the normal word for "willing" (*thelon*). So the question is: Does the verse mean "although God was willing to reveal his wrath, he nevertheless endured the objects of his wrath with great patience," that is, choosing not to display wrath, at least for a time? Or does it mean "because God wanted to reveal his wrath, he endured the objects of his wrath with patience," that is, in order to have an even greater demonstration of his wrath when at last he did or does show it?

As a follow-up to verses 19-21, the second of these possibilities seems best. That is, the verses seem to be saying again that God is right to show mercy to whom he wills to show mercy and harden whom he wants to harden. And they ask, "Who are we to say we do not like it? Or that God is unjust?"

If this is the meaning of these verses, I would apply them in the following way. God's chief end is to glorify God. Therefore, since God is all-powerful, this end will certainly be achieved. It will be achieved in every detail of history and in the destiny of every individual. Every person who has ever lived or will ever live must glorify God, either actively or passively, either willingly or unwillingly, either in heaven or in hell. You will glorify God. Either you will glorify him as the object

of his mercy and glory, which will be seen in you. Or you will glorify him in your rebellion and unbelief by being made the object of his wrath and power at the final judgment. In fact, if you are rebelling, you are glorifying him even now, because even now his patience is displayed in you by his enduring your sin for a time, rather than sending you to hell immediately, which you deserve.

In my judgment, verses 22-24 are to be interpreted this way and as teaching that the patience of God is seen in his toleration of the wicked for a time.

A Time for Repentance

Yet there is more to the idea of God's patience than this. The word *patience* is not used a great deal in Paul's writings, and most of the time, when it *is* used, it refers to a human virtue that is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives (cf. Gal. 5:22). Still, we can hardly overlook the fact that it has already been used of God once in Romans 2.

In that chapter, Paul is writing of God's righteous judgment on those who consider themselves to be better than other people but who actually do the same things and are guilty of the same sins. "Do you think you will escape God's judgment?" Paul asks (v. 3), particularly when you thus "show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience?" (v. 4). At this point Paul adds an interesting phrase: "not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance." This is an indirect purpose clause, showing what God's kindness, tolerance, and patience are for— they are intended to lead sinful men and women to repentance.

This is important, because on the basis of Romans 9:22 alone, we might think that God shows patience to the wicked only to allow the sins of such persons to accumulate so that he might more fully display his wrath and power in judging them at last. True, that is one purpose. It is what has been said of Pharaoh. God raised him up (even hardened his heart) so that the full measure of the divine power might be displayed in him and God's name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

But that is not the only purpose. The patience of God is also displayed so that those whom God is calling to faith might have space to repent. Both purposes are good. The second purpose is gracious.

We also need to look at 2 Peter 3, which is the most important chapter in the Bible for learning about the patience of God. In that chapter Peter is dealing with the problem posed by the delayed return of Jesus Christ. He is warning that it will not be long before scoffers appear, saying, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (v. 4). Peter then gives the answer to their taunt in three parts.

First, there has already been a judgment of the world by water in the days of Noah. Scoffers willingly forget this, not wanting to be troubled by it, but it is a warning of a greater judgment by fire yet to come (vv. 6-7).

Second, God's sense of time is not like ours. For us a day seems short, and a thousand years seems a long time. But for God "a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (v. 8).

Then Peter comes to his third and most important argument: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is *patient* with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (v. 9, emphasis added). Some people have understood this in an Arminian or anti-Calvinistic fashion, as if it were denying the doctrine of election. But that is not its meaning at all. Peter is speaking of the elect in this passage—"patient with *you*." So those God is not willing to have perish are the elect, and the reason God seems to be delaying the return of Jesus Christ is to give time for all those whom he has elected to belong to Jesus Christ to be born, to hear the gospel, to repent of sin, and come to faith.

This is what Peter also means later in the chapter where he writes, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him" (v.

15). It is because God is patient with us, not hastening to judgment, that we are saved.

I find it interesting, too, that Peter refers to Paul as having written the same thing. Where did Paul do that? Well, there are only two places in his writings where Paul speaks this way of God's patience: Romans 2:4 and Romans 9:22. Since Peter follows this comment with the observation that Paul's "letters contain some things that are hard to understand" and since Romans 9 is a particularly difficult chapter (Romans 2 is not), I would suppose that Peter is referring to the very verses we are studying, that is, Romans 9:22-24. Moreover, he is confessing that he himself found them to be difficult. If Peter, the apostle of the Lord, found them to be difficult, it should not be too disturbing to us if we find them difficult, too.

On the other hand, Peter does tell us what they mean. They teach that "the Lord's patience means salvation." In other words, they reinforce what I have been saying. The verses do not say only that God tolerates the wicked so that he may judge them more severely in the end and thus display both his wrath and power. They also teach that God is patient with sinners so they might repent of their sin and come to faith.

In fact, that is the direction in which Romans 9-11 is moving. The very next verse in Romans 9, verse 25, speaks of God's calling out a new people to himself, and in Romans 11 Paul is going to speak of the final salvation of "all Israel" (v. 26).

A Personal Testimony

There is one more text that needs to be drawn into this composite picture of God's patience as discussed in Paul's writings, and that is 1 Timothy 1:15-16, in which Paul speaks in a very moving way of God's unlimited patience to himself. He calls it a trustworthy saying. "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners,

Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

What Paul is giving in these verses is a personal illustration of what he discusses doctrinally in Romans. Paul was aware that he had been chosen by God in Christ from before the foundation of the world. But he also remembered with sadness how he had been allowed to go his own selfrighteous and wicked way for years until God called him. He was a Pharisee who had displayed his religious zeal by persecuting Christians, even hounding them to death. When the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was stoned by the people of Jerusalem with the Sanhedrin's sanction, Paul was holding the garments of those who were throwing stones. Paul hated Christians and the Jesus they worshiped.

Yet God was patient with Paul. Instead of striking him down, God suffered him to march along his own self-righteous path, heaping sin upon sin, until at last God called him to faith in the Jesus he was persecuting. God did it so the horror of Paul's earlier conduct might form a more striking contrast to the grace, mercy, and glory of God that he afterward received.

Every Christian's Story

This is not just Paul's story, of course. It is the story of believers throughout history.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, God was not rash in his judgments, hastening to consign them. Even though God had warned them that on the day they ate the forbidden fruit they would die, God did not execute the judgment of physical death upon them. Instead he came to them in the garden, not in wrath but calling quietly, just as he had come to them on earlier occasions. And although he dealt with their sin and pronounced some mild judgments, he also promised a deliverer. He told them of Jesus who would be wounded by Satan but who would one day destroy both Satan and his works.

How patient God was with Adam! How patient with Eve! Surely God was not willing for our first parents to perish but rather that they might

come to repentance and find eternal life.

God was patient with Abraham. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran for the land God promised to him. Before this, for many years, he had lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, blinded by the spiritual ignorance and evil of the times, even to the point of bowing down to false gods or idols (cf. Josh. 24:2). God suffered long with Abraham's sin, knowing that the time was coming when he would reveal himself to him and cause him to become the father of a great nation and a believing people.

How patient God was with Abraham!

And with Sarah! When God visited Abraham by the trees of Mamre and renewed the promise of a son, even though Abraham and Sarah were past the age of having children, Sarah laughed, saying, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" (Gen. 18:13). But God did not judge Sarah for her unbelief. He was patient with her, and the next year, when Sarah was ninety years old and Abraham was a hundred years old, Isaac was born.

God was patient with Moses, a man who was himself so impatient. When Moses was forty years old he took it into his head that he should be the deliverer of his people from Egypt. So he killed an Egyptian, no doubt hoping to start a rebellion. Instead, he had to flee. He fled to the far side of the great Sinai desert, where God trained him for an additional forty years. When God finally called him to go to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let the people go, Moses was reluctant and made many excuses. But God was patient with Moses, just as he was patient with the people at the time of the exodus and throughout their forty years of wandering before actually entering Canaan.

How many were the times when Israel blatantly sinned against God! God had delivered the people from Pharaoh. But when they came to Sinai and Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they made a golden calf and danced around it saying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exod. 32:4).

One writer says, "God might, without any impeachment of his justice, have executed the threatened judgment of destroying instantly that rebellious nation and raising up another from the loins of Moses. But he saw fit to exercise mercy toward them and to impart to them yet more abundant communications of his grace and favor.... By his patience and forbearance, his mercy was displayed. "

How patient God was with Israel! He was not willing that any of those whom he was calling to faith in Jesus Christ should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

I pass to the New Testament and think of the believing thief who died on a cross at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. The man was a murderer as well as a thief. He deserved to be in hell along with all other sinners. But God was patient with him, sparing him throughout a very long life of sin so that in the very last hours of his life he might demonstrate that grace can come even to the worst of men and in their final moments.

Surely, "our Lord's patience means salvation" (2 Peter 3:15), and "God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

Patient, But Not Forever

Has it led you toward repentance? Is it doing so now? Let me help you think the matter through by these observations.

1. *God is patient for a reason.* If you are not in hell today, which you are not though you deserve to be, it is because God has been patient with you, and the purpose of his patience is to lead you to repentance. God's patience is a great thing. We have explored some of its greatness in this study. But you must not abuse it. It is meant to do you good. The day of God's patience is the day of his grace.

Think how patient God has been with you.

You have sinned against knowledge, and he has been exceedingly patient. You are not like the heathen who know nothing of God or his salvation. You live in a country where the Scriptures are known, the

doctrines of the Bible are taught, the way of salvation is proclaimed, and the path of godliness is held up for all to see. But you have spurned that knowledge. You are like those described in Romans 1:32 who "know God's righteous decree" but who not only continue to sin but even approve of those who do it.

You may also have sinned against grace, and still God has been patient. You may have been born into a Christian home, belong to a good church, have Christian friends who care for you, witness to you, and pray for you. But you have not profited from those gracious acts and circumstances.

You have even sinned against patience, and yet God has been exceedingly patient with you. You know that "love so amazing, so divine," demands your all. You have refused to give it, and still God has been patient with you.

2. *God will not be patient forever.* Although God's patience is great, it is not eternal. We are warned in Scripture that God's wrath has been withheld by his patience, but that it is building up like waters behind a great dam and that it will one day be poured forth. God was patient with Pharaoh, but God judged him in the end. God was patient with Israel, but many perished in the desert. God was patient with the believing thief, but the other thief died in his sin and was condemned.

God's patience leads to repentance, but you must still repent. You must believe on Jesus. If you do not, you will face God's judgment in the end, however much you may scoff at it now.

Remember the story of the farmer. He was an unbelieving man and his farm was directly across the street from a church. Each Sunday the Christians would worship in church, but the farmer would display his scorn for them by plowing his fields up and down with his tractor during the worship services. Everyone could hear the noise and all were very conscious of what he was doing. He did this all summer. In October, when the crops were harvested, the farmer wrote a letter to the

town's newspaper, pointing out that he had worked every Sunday of the summer and that God had not struck him down for it. Instead his crops were in, and he had prospered as well as, if not better than, the Christian farmers. The newspaper printed his letter. But underneath it the editor of the paper added: "The Lord does not settle his accounts in October."

God is patient. His patience means salvation. But God's patience is not unending. One day the accounts will be settled and judgment will come.

3. *Because God is patient, we should be patient.* I mentioned earlier in this study that the word *patience* is not found in Paul with any special frequency. In fact, it is found in reference to God only three times. But here is the interesting thing: It is found as a virtue to be cultivated by Christians six times, that is, twice as often as in reference to God. It is a fruit of the Spirit, as I said earlier (Gal. 5:22; cf. Col. 1:11; 3:12), and it is commended as a virtue in the Christian ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 6:6; 2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2).

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, perhaps this is the application for you. We tend to be impatient with other people, especially with those we are trying to win to Christ. But God is patient, and we should be also.

There are four other attributes of God in Romans 9:22-24. Wrath is one, but we are not called upon to show wrath. "'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). Power is another, but it is God and not ourselves who must show power. Even glory is not for us to demonstrate. But we can show mercy. We are to be merciful people, remembering how God has been merciful to us. And, above all, we can be patient. It is not easy to be patient, but let us try to be. And the God who is himself patient may use our patience to draw many hurting people to the Savior.

Chapter 135.
"Children of the Living God"

Romans 9:25-26

There are times in a study of Paul's writings when it seems that the apostle has lost track of his argument. It is because his thought is so rich and because he has the habit of moving on quickly from one connected thought to another. We have found this in chapters 5 through 8 of this letter, and we see it in Paul's other writings too.

That seems to be the case in the verses we have been studying from Romans 9. You will recall from our initial studies that Paul is dealing with the question of Israel's apparent rejection by God and the problem raised by that rejection, namely, that if God has not been faithful to Israel in saving all Jews, but rather has abandoned some to perish in their sins, what is to make us think that he will be faithful to Gentile believers, in spite of the great statements Paul has made to that effect in Romans 8? Paul answered that God never elected all Jews to salvation, any more than he has elected all Gentiles to salvation, but that all those whom he did elect from both Jews and Gentiles will be saved.

That led Paul into a discussion of election and its counterpart, which theologians refer to as reprobation. And this led him into a discussion of theodicy, namely, the justification of the ways of God with men and women. He ended by speaking of the attributes of God displayed in the electing and reprobating process: love, wrath, hatred, power, glory, mercy, and patience. We have been following these digressions and therefore pursued the subject of God's patience in the last study.

Has Paul lost track of his argument? We are wrong if we think so. For at the very end of this section, in verse 24, Paul in a masterful way comes back to the point from which he started out, stating that salvation is for those whom God has chosen and called, "not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles."

In this verse Paul is showing who the "objects of mercy" are whom he has referred to in the preceding verses. They are the elect from among both Jews and Gentiles. As Robert Haldane says, "They are not only Jews but also Gentiles, and none of either Jews or Gentiles but those

who are called by the Spirit and word of God." Among other things, this verse also shows that all along Paul has been speaking about the election of individuals and not merely the election of peoples or nations, as some have argued.

A New Beginning

Verse 24 is not only a return to the point at which Paul began, however. It is also a wrap-up of his first main argument showing why God has not been unfaithful to Israel or, to use the language he himself uses, why the word or purposes of God have not failed. That means that verse 25, to which we come now, is beginning a new section of the argument.

Let me go back to the point at which I started in the first study in this volume. There I asked Paul's question, "Has the word of God failed?" I answered, "No." For seven reasons. The reasons are the outline of Romans 9-11, as I understand them. God's purposes have not failed, because:

1. All whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved (Rom. 9:6-24).
2. God had previously revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be (Rom. 9:25-29).
3. The failure of the Jews to believe was their own fault, not God's (Rom. 9:30-10:21).
4. Some Jews (Paul himself was an example) have believed and have been saved (Rom. 11:1).
5. It has always been the case that not all Jews but only a remnant has been saved (Rom. 11:2-10).
6. The salvation of the Gentiles, which is now occurring, is intended by God to arouse Israel to envy and thus be the means of saving some of them (Rom. 11:11-24).

7. In the end all Israel will be saved, and thus God will fulfill his promises to Israel nationally (Rom. 11:25-32).

That is the overall outline of these chapters, and you will see from this review that we are now at point two, namely, the argument that God's purposes toward the Jews (and Gentiles) have not failed, because God had previously revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be. If God had promised in advance that every individual Jew would be saved and then had failed to save all Jews, we could rightly accuse God of having broken his word and complain that his purposes have failed. But that is not the case, as the quotations from the Old Testament found in this next section of Romans 9 prove.

There are four quotations in verses 25-29, two from the minor prophet Hosea and two from the major prophet Isaiah. The passages from Hosea show the acceptability of the Gentiles. The passages from Isaiah show that the call to salvation has never included all Israel.

Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi

The Hosea quotations occur in the context of a story. So we need to review the story in order to understand them. Hosea had been told to marry a woman who was going to prove unfaithful to him, because God wanted him to provide a visible illustration of how the people of Israel had been unfaithful to God, but how God had remained faithful to them and loved them in spite of their infidelities. Although the woman would eventually leave Hosea in order to go after her lovers, Hosea would continue to love her and in the end would draw her back to himself.

So Hosea married the woman, as the early verses tell us: "When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.' So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim..." (Hos. 1:2-3).

At this point Gomer began to have children, and God intervened to give the children symbolic names, which is the point of the quotations

picked up by Paul in Romans 9.

The first child was a son. God said, "Name the son Jezreel."

Jezreel is a Hebrew word that has to do with the motion of the hand used in scattering something to the winds, or throwing it away. It was a strange name to give a child. But God gave Hosea and Gomer's son this name because the time was coming when God would scatter the people of the northern kingdom among the Gentile nations as punishment for their sins. Hosea prophesied into the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah (1:1), which was within six years of the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians. So this first prophecy was fulfilled almost immediately following his death.

The second child was a daughter. God said, "Name your daughter Lo-Ruhamah."

Lo-Ruhamah is composed of two Hebrew words, *Lo*, meaning "no" or "not" (the Hebrew negative), and *Ruhamah*, meaning "loved" or "pitied." God called the daughter "Not-Loved" or "Not-Pitied" because during the ages in which the Jews would be scattered among the Gentiles, God would show them no pity and would seem to have ceased loving them at all.

Finally another son was born. God said, "Call this third child Lo-Ammi."

This name also begins with the Hebrew negative "no" or "not," but the rest of it is a word meaning "my people." So Lo-Ammi means "Not-My-People." People who continue to think of the Jews as God's specially chosen people might wonder how this could be, but God was saying that the time would come when the Jews would cease to be his people in any special sense. As we are going to see, today the true people of God are neither the Jews as a nation nor any Gentile nation, but rather the church of Jesus Christ, which is composed of Jews and Gentiles according to the principle of election.

At this point a person might wonder how the story of Hosea can illustrate the unfailing love of God. Clearly, it illustrates the unfaithfulness of mankind and the way God judges sin. But love? Unfailing love? How is the unfailing love of God illustrated by the words *Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi?*

The answer is in the verses Paul quotes in Romans 9. He quotes two verses. The first is from the second chapter of Hosea, verse 23, though Paul uses only the second half. The full verse says,

> I will plant her for myself in the land;
> I will show my love to the one I called
> "Not my loved one."
> I will say to those called "Not my people,"
> "You are my people"; and they will say, "You are my God."

Each of the children's names is discussed in that verse, and the point is that the names will be changed, thus indicating the outcome of the story.

The first name is changed only in its meaning. It remains Jezreel, but the meaning is no longer "scattered" but "planted," because the same motion that would be used to throw something away was also used by farmers to scatter and thus plant grain. God refers to this change when he says, "I will *plant* her for myself in the land."

The second name is changed by eliminating the negative. Lo-Ruhamah will become Ruhamah, because God is going to love or have pity on the people once again. "I will show my *love* to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'"

In the same way, Lo-Ammi will become Ammi, because, as God says, "I will say to those called
'Not my people,' 'You are *my people*'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'"

The second verse Paul quotes in Romans 9 comes from the end of Hosea 1 and has the same effect as Hosea 2:23, though it deals only

with the change in the name Lo-Ammi: "In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God'" (Hosea 1:10). That is, Lo-Ammi will become Ammi, "My People."

Jews or Gentiles?

There is a difficulty at this point, however, and you may have noticed it if you have been comparing Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 with Romans 9:25-26 closely. In Hosea, the prophet is talking about the rejection and eventual restoration of the Jews of the ten northern tribes, whose capital was Samaria. But, in Romans, Paul is writing about Gentiles.

This problem is sometimes handled by saying that Paul is actually writing about the restoration of the Jews, which he does write about in Romans 11: "And so all Israel will be saved" (v. 26). But this view is clearly out of step with the Romans 9 context. Verse 24 is speaking of a new people, the elect people of God, which is the church of Jesus Christ, composed of Jews and Gentiles. And the verses that follow obviously teach that the Gentiles, which were not a people, have now become the people of God along with believing Jews, and that the Jews as a nation continue to be rejected, although a remnant is saved.

This is also the case in 1 Peter, where Peter uses Hosea 2:23 of Gentiles in exactly this way: "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

Is Paul misusing Scripture, then? There are some who would say so, but this is not actually the case. What Paul's quotation does show is the way he understood the words spoken to Israel when God called the nation Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi.

Particularly Lo-Ammi, which is the name he focuses on in his quotations. According to Paul's thinking, Lo-Ammi is not to be understood merely in the sense that the people were going to be treated *as if* they were no longer God's people when, in fact, they were. Rather

it means that they actually ceased to be God's people in a special sense. That is, they became "Gentiles" so far as their relationship to God was concerned. So it is not actually of Jews that the words "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people" are spoken but of those who have become "Gentiles" by their rejection of God. It is from these Gentiles, both ethnic Gentiles and ethnic Jews who have thus actually become "Gentiles," that the new people of God is formed.

Using other words, Charles Hodge put it like this: "The ten tribes were in a heathenish state, relapsed into idolatry, and, therefore, what was said of them is, of course, applicable to others in like circumstances or of like character."

Likewise Calvin: "When the Jews were banished from the family of God, they were thereby reduced to a common level with the Gentiles. The distinction between Jew and Gentile has been removed, and the mercy of God now extends indiscriminately to all the Gentiles."

Here is another point. You will notice from a careful comparison of Hosea 1:10 and Romans 9:26 that there is an emphasis in Romans on the words "in the very place." In this context the words do not refer to Samaria, which fell to the Assyrians in 721 B.C., or to Jerusalem, which fell in 586 B.C., but to Gentile lands, the very places where it was said of the scattered nation, "You are not my people." So it is among the Gentiles that men and women were to be called to faith and be designated "sons of the living God." You and I are those people, whether Jews or Gentiles, if we have been called to faith in Jesus Christ and trust him as our Savior.

By Grace Alone

All of this makes Paul's chief point, of course, namely, that God's rejection of Israel as Israel and his election of the Gentiles should have taken nobody by surprise, particularly the Jews, since it was prophesied clearly in the Jewish Scriptures. He is going to make the same point by the quotations from Isaiah, which come next. But before we go on to

those texts we need to make a few applications from what we have observed so far.

1. *Salvation is of grace.* It seems strange that we should have to make this point again and again, but we do simply because our sinful natures always try to claim some credit with God and put him in our debt. That is exactly what the Jews of Paul's day were attempting to do. They were claiming that they had a special status before God simply because they were Jews and that God was therefore in lasting debt to them. Paul's use of the texts from Hosea shows that this is not the case. God declared the Jews no longer to be "his people." He had no special relationship to them and therefore no obligation to them. So, if they were to be saved, it would only be because God has chosen to be gracious, precisely the way he saves Gentiles.

I need to say that if a Jew thinks differently, supposing himself to have some special relationship to God apart from Jesus Christ, this is at least understandable, since most of the Old Testament does indeed assume a special relationship between God and Israel. The Jew needs to be taught more perfectly from his own Scriptures, as Paul is doing in this chapter. But although a Jew might be excused for his mistake and merely need to be instructed better, there is no excuse for your making this mistake, if you are a Gentile. Why? It is because Gentiles never did have a special relationship to God.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, saying that before they were called to faith they were "foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

If salvation has come to you, it is by grace alone. And if it has not yet come, you should know that it will never be found by any achievement on your part but only by the mercy of God. All you can do is throw yourself and all hope for your salvation on him.

2. *Salvation is all of God.* The first point leads to the second. For if salvation is all of grace, then salvation is all of God. For only God is in

a position to be gracious, and only God has power to do what is necessary to save us.

I think this is the reason for the words "sons of the *living* God" in verse 26 (emphasis added). "Living God" does not only refer to the fact that God is real and alive, as opposed to the dead or nonexistent gods of the heathen, but also to the fact that he is the source of life. It was he who gave life to Adam in the Garden of Eden when Adam was only a form shaped out of clay. Likewise, it is he who breathes life into our dead souls today, imparting the Holy Spirit by which alone we live spiritually. No one can save himself. That is what we have been seeing repeatedly in our study of these chapters. So, if salvation is to happen, it must be by God who alone can regenerate the dead soul.

3. *If you are saved, your salvation demands the greatest measure of devotion and love from you to God.* For the last point I go back to the story of Hosea and its ending, which Paul does not mention but which would have been in the minds of everyone who read his words and was also familiar with the Old Testament.

Earlier in this study I took time to explain the symbolism of the names of Hosea and Gomer's children and indicate how the names would be changed, but I did not say much about Gomer. According to the story, the time came when Gomer left Hosea, as God had warned the prophet would happen. She sank lower and lower in the social scale of the times, and the day came when she fell into slavery, probably because of debt, and was sold on an auction block in the city of Samaria. Hosea was told to go and buy her. He bid a high price, fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethek of barley. But at last she was his once more.

If he had hated her, he could have killed her for the pain she had caused him. She was his property. But it was at this point that Hosea's love shone brightest, since it was a reflection of the unfailing love of God, which he was illustrating. Hosea promised to be a faithful husband to Gomer, which he had been, while at the same time demanding faithfulness from her in return.

This is a picture of what Jesus Christ has done for us, for he has purchased us from the slavery of sin by his own blood. It is what the word *redemption* means. Now we belong to him, and we are called on to give him the fullest measure of love of which we are capable. If God did not love us and had not moved to redeem us by the death of Jesus Christ, we might be excused for our failure to love him. But since he has loved us and has saved us, our only proper response is to give him our all. Isaac Watts wrote,

> Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Nothing else is an adequate response to him who died for us.

Chapter 136.
The Testimony of Isaiah

Romans 9:27-29

In our study of Romans we have already had several occasions to observe how Paul develops a theological argument, as contrasted to the way Peter does it, for example. In Peter's great sermon on Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2, the pattern Peter used was to quote a text from the Old Testament and then explain it. He did this three times in that one sermon, explaining Joel 2:2832, Psalm 16:8-11, and Psalm 110:1. Paul's procedure is the opposite. His way is to develop his argument first and then support it in closing by a few choice scriptural citations.

We saw this first in Romans 3:10-18, where Paul introduced a long string of quotations to nail down the argument he had previously unfolded in chapters 1 and 2. We are finding exactly the same thing in Romans 9.

Paul began this chapter by asking whether God's purposes in regard to the Jewish people had failed, which seemed to be the case, since not all Jews—in fact, very few—were believing in Christ. Paul answered that the purposes of God had not failed, because God had never intended to

save every individual Jew any more than he intends to save every Gentile. Instead, God has always operated by the principle of election, according to which some out of the great number of both Jews and Gentiles are brought to Christ. This led him to speak also of reprobation and then of the attributes of God displayed in his actions toward the saved and lost. At last Paul returned to the point at which he started out, concluding that God has been calling his elect "not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles" (v. 24).

At this point the apostle brings in his quotations, two from Hosea and two from Isaiah. The point of the Hosea quotations is that God had announced in advance that he would save Gentiles. The point of the Isaiah quotations is that he had likewise announced that not all Jews, but only a remnant of Israel, would be converted.

The First Quotation: Isaiah 10:22-23

There is an interesting tie-in between Isaiah 10:22-23, the first of Paul's quotations from Isaiah (v. 27), and Hosea 1:10, the second of his two quotations from the lesser prophet, which has just been given (v. 26).

In chapter 1 of Hosea, verse 10 begins with the words "Yet the Israelites will be like the sand of the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted." Paul does not quote those words in Romans 9:26, though he quotes the second half of the verse, because the words are about Israel explicitly and Paul wants to use the verse as a promise of God's future blessing on the Gentiles. I explained how he does this in the previous study. But Paul has not forgotten the words, and it is those words that remind him of the verse from Isaiah, which he cites next, since they begin that verse. It says, "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved."

Do you see what is happening? The first verse is saying that even though the Jewish people of Samaria would be overthrown and scattered, God would bring them back to their land and cause them to grow into a great people once again. But lest someone throw that verse up in Paul's face, saying, "But in Hosea 1:10 God says that he is going

to save a vast multitude of Jews," Paul quotes the same words in Isaiah to show that even though there might be a vast number belonging to the reconstituted Jewish nation, only a small portion or remnant of those persons will be saved from sin.

Isn't that exactly what we see? Leaving the unbelief of the Gentiles aside for a moment, isn't it true that Isaiah 10:22 describes the generally poor results and great difficulties of Jewish evangelism?

A Remnant Chosen by Grace

The most important words in verse 27 are "the remnant." This is a very significant term in the Old Testament, and it has importance for the theology of the New Testament, too. Yet, surprisingly, I have not found a great deal written about it even in textbooks of Old Testament theology.

Several Hebrew words are translated "remnant" in our Bibles, but the most significant is the verb *sha*ʾ*ar* (over 130 occurrences) and the noun forms of the same word, *she*ʾ*ar* (26 occurrences) and *she*ʾ*erit* (66 occurrences). Altogether, these words are found hundreds of times in the Old Testament, chiefly in the Prophets. In the New International Bible the English word "remnant" occurs sixty-three times.

Initially the words seem to have had a military meaning. For instance, in Deuteronomy 3 there is a description of a battle between the Israelites, who were passing through the desert after leaving Mount Horeb, and the Rephaites, commanded by King Og of Bashan. The Rephaites were so thoroughly defeated that the text reports, "Only Og king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaites" (Deut. 3:11a). Similarly, in 2 Kings 19, King Hezekiah, who was besieged and mocked by the Assyrians, sent to Isaiah to ask him to pray for the Jewish "remnant that still survives" (v. 4), and Isaiah responded with an oracle in which God promised that the remnant would not only be spared destruction by Sennacherib but would even prosper for a time like a fruitful tree.

Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above.
For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.

2 Kings 19:30-31

A large number of these passages refer to little more than the physical survival of a small number of Jews following a military catastrophe, such as the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. But, increasingly, particularly in the later Prophets, the remnant becomes, not merely a group of survivors but a chastened, regenerated, and converted people whom we would describe as the elect or "saved" within Israel.

One important example of this is in 1 Kings 19, though the word *remnant* does not occur in that chapter. I refer to it because Paul refers to it himself in Romans 11, applying the word *remnant* to the situation. It is the story of Elijah at Horeb after his great victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah had achieved a stunning victory that resulted in the overthrow and death of the prophets of Baal. The battle had taken an enormous emotional toll on him, so that, when Queen Jezebel threatened to have him killed, Elijah fled to the wilderness discouraged, despondent, and content to die. In fact, that is what he told God.

God asked him, "What are you doing here?" (1 Kings 19:13).

Elijah answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (v. 14).

God replied that he still had work for Elijah to do, that he would appoint a helper for him in his eventual successor Elisha, and that Elijah was wrong in thinking that he was the only faithful person left in Israel. "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (v. 18). When

Paul gets around to referring to this story in Romans 11, he concludes, "So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace" (v. 5).

This is exactly what we find in Romans 9. And it is the meaning of the bulk of the other Old Testament references. Lawrence O. Richards says that the regenerated remnant referred to in the later Prophets is "made up of those in Israel who will experience conversion and receive the promised covenant blessings." According to my count, the English word *remnant* is used of this new entity six times in Isaiah, three times in Jeremiah, five times in Micah, and three times each in Zephaniah and Zechariah.

This remnant will be saved.

The actual words in Romans 9:27 are "the remnant," that is, the remnant of God's electing choice. As for the rest, "The Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality" (v. 28). That is, the rest will perish in God's final judgments.

The Second Quotation: Isaiah 1:9

Verse 29, the second of Paul's two quotations from Isaiah, picks up from the second half of the first quotation, also referring to judgment:

> *Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants,*
> *we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been*
> *like Gomorrah.*

But this is a different kind of reference. The first Old Testament quotation describes what is surely going to happen: "God will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." This verse describes what is sometimes called "a condition contrary to fact." It teaches that unless the Lord had left a remnant, the people would have been like those of Sodom and Gomorrah, that is, entirely wiped out. They would have ceased to exist. Yet this is not the case. In fact, God has left a remnant, which, as Paul is going to say in Romans 11, he has "chosen by grace" (v. 5).

Apart from the grace of God, destruction! Fire from heaven! The only thing that keeps this from happening to all of us is the mercy and kindness of God. It is only because of the inexplicable grace of God that any of us are spared the fate of Sodom and its sister city.

A Summary

In the next study, beginning with Romans 9:30, we will be going on to the next section of Paul's seven-point argument in Romans 9-11, in which Paul is going to show that God's purposes have not failed, because the failure of the Jews to believe on Christ is their own fault and not God's. Before we do that, however, we need to summarize and apply what we have seen in this section.

1. *God's word can be trusted.* We begin by reminding ourselves that the apostle's main point in this section is that the Bible foretells exactly what has happened through the proclamation of the gospel: (1) Gentiles have been included in what seemed at one time to have been an exclusive privilege of Israel, that is, to be God's elect or saved people, and (2) only a small remnant of Israel has been or is presently being saved. What God foretold has been fulfilled.

We need to learn that truth, and we need to apply it in many areas of our lives. We need it because we all naturally try to outguess or improve on the Bible.

I speak here to professing Christians, who know the Word of God. You know what God says about following him: for example, about seeking "first his kingdom and his righteousness," knowing that "all these things"—food, clothing, the necessities of life, and other good things—"will be given to you" (Matt. 6:33). But you do not do that. You put other things first, leaving God until last, if indeed he gets even that position. You do not think often of him. You do not study his Word. You do not spend time with other Christians. You do not give your money to Christian work or causes. Then you are surprised when life does not go well for you and you run into difficulties. Why should you be surprised?

God does not lie, and he has told you in advance how the Christian life is to be lived and what will happen to you if you neglect him.

The Bible says, "Fear the LORD, you his saints, / for those who fear him lack nothing" (Ps. 34:9).

God declares, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained" (1 Sam. 2:30b).

Above all, the Bible says, "God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8).

I encourage you to learn the important lesson of taking God's Word at face value and not try to explain it away as applying to someone else or to another time or to different circumstances. The Word of God is inerrant, it is everlasting, and it is speaking about you. The psalmist says,

> *Who knows the power of your anger?*
> *For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.*
> *Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*
>
> *Psalm 90:11-12*

2. *All are not saved.* The second obvious point of these four citations from the Old Testament is that not all people will be saved.

We have a rather fond notion floating around the Christian church today, even in evangelical churches, that this is not true, and that somehow everybody will be brought to heaven because— this is the way it is usually expressed—God is a God of love, and he could not possibly condemn anyone. I do not know anything else to call this notion but the devil's lie. And what a lie it is! If God is so loving that he will never see his way clear to judge me, well then, I can live my life as I please, even doing the worst possible things, and I will still be rewarded for it. I can be an utter scoundrel. I can cheat, rob, lie, and

murder, and it will still turn out right. God cannot possibly condemn me. His character forbids it.

What could be more character-destroying than that? What could be more mind-numbing, more soporific? What could be more demonic?

What could be more wrong?

These verses tell us that God is as much a God of justice as he is a God of love, and that he will eventually display the attributes of his justice on the wicked, namely, his wrath and his power. They tell us that God did not save all people in the Old Testament period, not even all the Jewish people, who are called God's "chosen" ones. If God did not do it then, there is no reason to suppose he will do it now or in the future, especially when he has told us the contrary, which he does in these verses. The remnant will be saved, but for the rest "the Lord will carry out his sentence... with speed and finality" (v. 28).

With speed! That means before long, with no delays. With finality! That means for good. The judgment will be one from which there will be no appeal and no escape.

So I encourage you to abandon the false notion that God will not condemn you. I can understand why you think that way. No one wants to face hard truths. I do not like them myself. But the fact that judgment will come is nevertheless true, and nothing is to be gained by denying or dodging it. On the contrary, God tells us that judgment is coming so we will flee from sin to Jesus, where alone salvation from God's judgment may be found.

3. *Formal membership in the covenant body does not save anyone.* The third point is that merely formal membership either in the synagogue or in the church does not save anyone. If it could have saved anyone, it would have been the Jews who possessed, according to Romans 9:4-5, "the
adoption as sons,... the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.... the patriarchs" and even the "human ancestry" leading to the coming of Jesus Christ. But this did not save

them. Only personal faith in Jesus Christ saves anyone. If it did not save them, why should you think that mere membership in a church, even an evangelical church, will save you?

Even less, why should you think that you are on your way to heaven merely because your parents are saved people or other members of your family believe on Christ and take his teaching seriously?

For my part, I cannot understand this delusion. I can understand people rejecting Christianity entirely, believing it simply is not true. I can understand them fighting it, not wanting to surrender to the claims of Jesus Christ on their lives. That does not come easy for anyone. But what I cannot understand is people, particularly young people, believing that everything is well with their souls simply because their parents or friends are Christians, when for their own part they are not following Jesus Christ in any significant way whatsoever.

Is this your delusion? If so, let me ask this—Can you think of one significant thing in your life, for which you are yourself personally responsible—not something that was decided for you— which is different because of your supposed relationship to Jesus Christ?

One thing?

Is there a sin you have left because you love Christ and know that he would want you to leave it?

Is there a commitment you have made because it is something you know a Christian should do?

Have you ever chosen something that is right simply because it is right and not because it was expedient or because of what someone else might think of you if you had chosen differently?

Think carefully. If you do not have a pattern of life along those lines—rejection of sin, Christian commitments, and righteous choices—how can you possibly suppose you are a Christian? You are merely a member of a Christian family or a member of a Christian church, and

that does not make you one of God's true people, any more than mere membership in the nation of Israel made a Jew one of God's elect.

Of course, none of this would matter if all we are speaking about is having a good or slightly better life or avoiding certain temporal problems. But that is not the case. That is "a condition contrary to fact." What we are talking about are issues of life and death, salvation and judgment, faith and rebellion, heaven and hell, truth and falsehood, reality and the bubble of mere human speculation. Judgment is certain. I urge you to turn from your fantasies and surrender your life to Jesus Christ now.

And I emphasize "now." You are moved *now.* You are willing to face the possibility that all this may indeed be true *now.* The Holy Spirit is speaking to you *now.* But you are going to move back into the world, and when you do the devil will be there again with his seductive suggestions. The world will close in upon you with its lies. Will you find it easier to commit yourself to Christ then? You know the answer to that. You will not. The time to settle the matter is right now. Right now is the only proper time to trust your life to Jesus Christ.

Part Thirteen: Jewish Unbelief

Chapter 137.

Righteousness Wrongly Sought by Works

Romans 9:30-32

If anyone could ever have achieved salvation by his own efforts, it was Martin Luther. In 1505, when he was twenty-one years old, Luther abandoned a promising career in law and entered the monastery of the Augustine hermits at Erfurt. As he later said, this was not to study academic theology but to save his soul.

In those days the monastic orders prescribed ways by which the seeking soul could find God, and Luther, with the determination and strength that characterized his entire life, gave himself rigorously to these tasks. He fasted and prayed. He devoted himself to menial work. Above all, he practiced penance, confessing his sins, even the most trivial, for hours on end until his superiors wearied of his exercise and ordered him to stop until he had committed some sin worth confessing. Luther's piety gained him a reputation for being the most exemplary of monks.

Later he wrote to the Duke of Saxony, "I was indeed a pious monk and followed the rules of my order more strictly than I can express. If ever a monk could obtain heaven by his monkish works, I should certainly have been entitled to it. Of this all the friars who have known me can testify. If it had continued much longer, I should have carried my mortification even to death, by means of my watchings, prayers, reading and other labors."

Yet Luther found no peace through these exercises.

The monkish wisdom of the day instructed him to satisfy God's demand for righteousness by doing good works. "But what works?" thought Luther. "What works can come from a heart like mine? How can I stand before the holiness of my Judge with works polluted in their very source?"

It was not until John Staupitz, the Vicar-General of the Congregation and Luther's wise spiritual father, set him to studying the Bible that Luther realized what the difficulty was. He was trying to earn salvation by works of human righteousness, when the righteousness we need is not human righteousness at all. It is divine righteousness, and this can become ours only if God gives it to us, which he does in the gospel.

Luther had been seeking righteousness by means of human works, when what he needed was to accept God's righteousness by simple faith and therefore stop trying to work for it.

Election and Human Responsibility

It is not often that I have received objections to a sermon even before I have preached it. But that happened when I was about to preach the sermon that has become this chapter of my studies in Romans. The objection came up because I had already announced the point of this sermon while giving an overall outline of Romans 9-11.

I had said that the third reason why the purposes of God have not failed in regard to Israel, the reason Paul develops in these verses, is that the failure of the Jews to believe the gospel was their fault and not God's. The people who objected felt that, on the one hand, I was unfairly attacking Jewish people and, on the other hand, that I was blaming Israel for unbelief when the Scriptures plainly say that it is God himself who hardened Israel's heart. Paul says this in Romans 11:7-10, quoting several Old Testament texts to prove it.

As far as the first criticism goes, it may be that what I said earlier was not balanced well enough. I have been trying to say that the unbelief of Israel is typical of all human unbelief. I have constantly made links between Jews and Gentiles, stressing that all are equal before God and that all must be saved in precisely the same way, through faith in Jesus Christ, because "God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34). Nevertheless, Paul is discussing Jewish unbelief particularly, and it is hard to explain Paul's teaching, which I am trying to do, without a great many comments on the Jewish side of the Jewish-Gentile combination.

If I failed to treat that in a clearly evenhanded way, I am sorry.

The second criticism is more substantial and more important, because it suggests that if God hardens hearts, then those he hardens must be excused of the sin of unbelief. That is, the unbelief is not their fault. Or, to put it in the larger categories of election and reprobation that Paul has been treating in these chapters, if God elects some to salvation and passes by others, then those who have been passed by cannot be blamed for failing to have responded to the gospel. At least, that is the argument that was given.

However, anyone who has been closely following these studies of Romans 9 already knows the answer to that objection, because Paul has been dealing with it directly for many verses. The extreme case is that of Pharaoh, whose heart is said many times in Exodus to have been hardened. It is true that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Exodus says so. But it is also true that Pharaoh had already hardened his own heart. In any case, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God was a proper judicial hardening because of Pharaoh's many other sins.

When I discussed this same matter in terms of election and reprobation, I pointed out that the two are alike in some respects but dissimilar in others. They are alike in that both flow from the eternal counsels or will of God and are designed to make the attributes of God known. But they are also different, and one of the ways they are different is that election is due to the special and gracious intervention of God in an individual's life to save that person, while reprobation is merely God's passing by a person, thereby allowing him to continue in his own way and eventually be judged for his sin. That is a very important point.

God never condemns innocent people. Therefore, regardless of what we may or may not understand about the process of election, we can know that if we are judged by God, it must be for the sake of our own sin. And that means that unbelief must be our own fault.

If it is not, whose fault can it be?

You can't blame it on God.

This is the point of Paul's teaching in Romans 9:30-32, because, as I said when providing an overview of chapters 9 through 11, what he is showing is that the unbelief of Israel is not to be blamed on God. And, let me add, the unbelief of the Gentiles is not to be blamed on God either. All human beings instinctively want to do that, both Jews and Gentiles. We do not like the doctrine of election, because it throws us upon the mercy of God. But assuming that we do nevertheless accept the truth of the doctrine, the next evasion is to try to deny our own responsibility.

We are not mere puppets in God's hands. We are responsible human beings, in spite of what we might wrongly deduce from Paul's earlier discussion of election and reprobation.

Romans 9:30-32 could be taken as summing up the preceding verses, which they do in a sense. But they are actually a new section of the argument, as I have been saying. In fact, they introduce a major new portion of the argument, because the matters they raise continue to be discussed throughout the remainder of chapters 9 and 10, and it is not until Romans 11:1 that Paul brings in an entirely new observation.

These verses have a very simple outline. Verse 30 says that the Gentiles as a whole are being saved. Verse 31 says that the Jews as a whole were not being saved. Verse 32 explains why.

Gentile Salvation: By Grace Alone

The critical word in these three verses is "righteousness," which we see at once when we read them. In the New International Version, righteousness is found three times, but it actually occurs four times in the Greek text, one of those instances being translated by the pronoun "it" in our versions. Righteousness is a dominant word in Romans, occurring (in the NIV text) thirty-two times in all. Yet the treatment in these verses and as far as verse 6 in chapter 10, is the first extensive discussion of the idea since chapter 6.

What does righteousness mean? In these verses it is the equivalent of salvation or, to be more precise, justification, which is the same word as righteousness in Greek. Verses 30 and 31 tell us that the Gentiles were not seeking salvation, yet found it, while the Jews, who *were* seeking salvation, did not find it.

And yet, righteousness is the proper word to use, because it more fully describes the kind of salvation being sought. Salvation is a broad term. There can be many kinds of salvation. But righteousness refers to the righteous requirements of the law of God and therefore has to do with a right standing before him. What we are told in verse 30 is that the Gentiles were not seeking this right standing before God by serious attempts to fulfill God's law, and yet they found that right standing anyhow.

How did they do that?

The first part of the verse is not hard to explain. It is a simple observation along the lines of
Romans 1. Far from seeking the righteousness of God by obedience to the law of God, the Gentiles had actually rejected God and were in the process of running away from him and his law as rigorously and rapidly as possible. This placed them on that downward slippery path that Paul describes so well. It is a slope on which they began to sin in greater and greater ways until in the end they had lost the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. In fact, they called the wrong, right and the right, wrong—evil, good and good, evil. They had inverted the moral order of God's true righteousness entirely.

The surprising thing is that they were finding righteousness anyhow. Why? Because that righteousness is in Christ, and they were finding it in Christ because they were believing on him as their Savior. If we should ask how this can be, seeing that they were not even seeking it, the answer is that this was due entirely to the seeking grace of God.

Take a moment and circle two words in these verses: "obtained" in verse 30 and "attained" in verse 31. If you have an Authorized or King

James Version, you will not be able to do this, because you will find the word *attained* in both places, which is unfortunate, because it suggests that the two situations are alike in nature and differ only in that one was successful and the other was not. Actually, there are two entirely different words in the Greek text, and it is this right and proper distinction that the New International Version and some other versions capture.

Let me illustrate the difference between these words by a cartoon that Donald Grey Barnhouse tells about in his commentary. It showed a boardroom of a large company, with the president standing before his subordinates. Behind him on the wall was a portrait of the company's founder, who was obviously the man's father. The president was scowling at his subordinates, and the caption said, "The trouble with you people is that you have no initiative. Why, by the time I was thirty years old, I had *inherited* my first five million dollars."

There is a big difference between inheriting a million dollars and earning it. So, to use this illustration, what this verse tells us is that the Gentiles, who did not set out to earn their righteousness, nevertheless inherited it or, as the NIV says, "obtained" it as a free gift.

Jewish Failure: A Surprising Fact

Verse 30, then, has introduced us to a surprising situation: the fact that the Gentiles, who had not sought salvation, were nevertheless finding it. The only possible explanation of this mystery is God's grace. But now we come to verse 31, and we find an even greater puzzle. We find that the Jews, who were trying to earn their salvation, did not attain it.

We will not appreciate the surprising nature of this situation unless we take Paul's words at full value and acknowledge that the Jews had indeed "pursued a law of righteousness." This takes us back to Romans 2, where Paul described his countrymen as relying on the law, knowing the will of God and then choosing what is superior because of that knowledge (vv. 17-18). He wrote, "You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the

embodiment of knowledge and truth" (vv. 17-20). That was absolutely true. The Jews did have the law, and devout Jews did pursue acceptance before God by that means. Like Paul himself during his years as a Pharisee, they labored earnestly to keep the law in all its many minute particulars, thinking that they would be saved by so doing.

But what those verses from Romans 2 also show is that their trying to keep the law was doomed to failure. What the Jews had not reckoned on was their own sinful natures, which made it as impossible for them to keep the law of God perfectly as it would have been for Gentiles to keep it, had they possessed the law and tried to keep it.

The Jews—Paul himself was one—thought they were closer to salvation than the Gentiles, because they were at least trying to keep God's law. But what they failed to see is that they were still failing. And because they refused to see that, they also failed to see what the law was actually given for: to show that we cannot achieve salvation by our works and to point us to the only way salvation can come, which is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Instead of becoming self-righteous, we should become aware of our radical unrighteousness and turn to Christ. We should see what the hymnwriter Augustus Toplady saw clearly when he wrote:

> Not the labors of my hands
> Can fulfill thy law's demands;
> Could my zeal no respite know,
> Could my tears forever flow,
> All for sin could not atone;
> Thou must save, and thou alone.

Many labor and have zeal, perhaps even tears. But none of this is enough. The hymn rightly says that only God can save us, and—if that is the case—salvation must be received on God's terms, which means through faith in the work of Jesus Christ.

By Works or Through Faith?

What I have just said anticipates the point of verse 32. For, having observed how the Gentiles, who had not sought righteousness, found it and how the Jews, who sought righteousness, had *not* found it, the apostle now adds an explanation of the second case. "Why did the Jews fail to attain salvation?" he asks. The answer is, "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works." That is, they sought it in the wrong way.

And so do we all, until God shows us our many stubborn errors and turns our minds and hearts to Jesus Christ.

During the last century, in the worst slum district of London, there was a social worker whose name was Henry Moorehouse. One evening as Moorehouse was walking along the street, he saw a little girl come out of a basement store carrying a pitcher of milk. She was taking it home. When she was a few yards from Moorehouse, she suddenly slipped and fell. Her hands relaxed their grip on the pitcher and it dropped on the sidewalk and broke. The milk ran down into the gutter, and the little girl began to cry as if her heart would break. Moorehouse quickly stepped up to see if she was hurt. He helped her to her feet, saying, "Don't cry, little girl."

But she kept crying, repeating through her tears, "My mommy'll whip me; my mommy'll whip me."

Moorehouse said, "No, little girl, your mother won't whip you. I'll see to that. Look, the pitcher isn't broken in many pieces." As he stooped down beside her, picked up the pieces, and began to work as if he were putting the pitcher back together, the little girl stopped crying. She had hope. She came from a family in which pitchers had been mended before. Maybe this stranger could repair the damage. She watched as Moorehouse fitted several of the pieces together until, working too roughly, he knocked it apart again. Once more she began to cry, and Moorehouse had to repeat, "Don't cry, little girl. I promise you that your mother won't whip you."

Again they began the task of restoration, this time getting it all together except for the handle. Moorehouse gave it to the little girl, and she tried to attach it. But, naturally, all she did was knock it down again. This time there was no stopping her tears. She would not even look at the broken pieces lying on the sidewalk.

Finally Moorehouse picked the little girl up in his arms, carried her down the street to a shop that sold crockery, and bought her a new pitcher. Then, still carrying her, he went back to where the girl had bought the milk and had the new pitcher filled. He asked her where she lived. When he was told, he carried her to the house, set her down on the step, and placed the full pitcher of milk in her hands. Then he opened the door for her. As she stepped in, he asked one more question, "Now, do you think your mother will whip you?"

He was rewarded for his trouble by a bright smile as she said to him, "Oh, no, sir, 'cause it's a lot better pitcher 'an we had before."

That is a wonderful illustration of what we do in trying to earn our salvation, and what God does.

When Adam and Eve fell in the Garden of Eden, it was as if the pitcher of human life and morality fell and was forever broken, while all the goodness it contained began to run out. This is not to say that there is no value at all to the broken pieces. I have seen works of art made from broken pieces of pottery, and archaeologists use pottery shards to date ancient civilizations. In an analogous way, there is some limited value to human character, especially in mere secular affairs. But, as far as establishing a right relationship to God is concerned, human character is as worthless as the broken pitcher.

And it does not matter how much effort we spend trying to fit the pieces back together. "All the king's horses and all the king's men, can never put Humpty Dumpty together again." In fact, not even God tries to put it back together.

Instead, like Henry Moorehouse, God holds out a new pitcher filled with the new life of Jesus
Christ and places it in our empty hands. And he assures us that he won't judge us now, because
"it's a much better pitcher than we had before." In fact, it is a perfect one. It is the very righteousness of God's Son.

What do you need to do?

There is only thing you can do, and that is also what you need to do. You can accept it. You need to open up your hands and receive it. You need to wrap your fingers around it and clutch it to your heart. And stop trying to think that you have earned salvation or can earn it, because you cannot. Righteousness is wrongly sought by human works. It is only rightly found by the faith that receives God's gift.

Chapter 138.
Stumbling over Christ

Romans 9:32-33

One of the most important principles of biblical interpretation is that Scripture interprets Scripture. This means that the best way to discover what a problem passage means is to see what other verses dealing with the same theme say. The related passages may, and usually do, speak more clearly. Scripture always illuminates Scripture, and the comparison of Scripture with Scripture is the only sure way to study the Bible accurately.

This is true of the subject we come to in this study. In the last two verses of Romans 9 the apostle Paul introduces an image to illustrate what he has been saying in the earlier half of the paragraph, namely, that Israel had not obtained salvation because the people as a whole had been offended by Jesus, rather than believing him or placing their faith in him. His image is of a "stumbling stone," which is what he calls Jesus, drawing on two passages in Isaiah for the illustration.

Yet these are not the only places in the Bible where we find this image, and a careful study of the many passages there are shows how rich a theme this was, not only for Paul but for many of the New Testament figures, including Jesus. I want to explore its richness in this study.

The Quotations from Isaiah

The place to begin is with the quotations from Isaiah. There are two of them, Isaiah 8:14 and
28:16, even though Paul has combined them into what seems to be a single quotation in Romans 9:33. Isaiah 28:16 says, "See, I lay a stone in Zion, / a tested stone, / a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; / the one who trusts will never be dismayed." Isaiah 8:14 says that "for both houses of Israel he [that is, Jehovah] will be / a stone that causes men to stumble / and a rock that makes them fall...."In his citation Paul has used the first and last part of Isaiah 28:16, but has substituted Isaiah 8:14 for what comes between.

Why does he make this alteration? Does this mean that Paul has no real respect for Scripture and therefore quotes it any way he likes, distorting it if necessary?

The answer is exactly the opposite. Instead of distorting Scripture, Paul is doing what I was referring to earlier when I spoke of the manner in which one verse of the Bible interprets another. In Isaiah 8:14, the prophet seems to be saying that Jehovah is the stone that causes people to stumble, the idea that Paul wants to emphasize. But the later verse, Isaiah 28:16, makes clear that the stumbling stone is another individual whom God is going to set "in Zion." This means that the latter passage explains the earlier one, showing that the stumbling stone is actually the Lord Jesus Christ whom the Father sent into the world.

Robert Haldane summarizes many of the implications of this image when he writes:

The designations of a stone and a rock are given to Jesus Christ, both presenting the idea that the great work of redemption rests solely on

him. He is its author, the foundation on which it rests, the center in which all its lines meet, and the origin from which they proceed. He is to that work what the foundation stone and the rock on which it is erected are to the building, sustaining it and imparting to it form and stability. In another sense, he is a stone of stumbling, occasioning his rejection by those who, not believing in him, are cut off from communion with God.

It works the other way, too—for the passages in Isaiah not only identify Jesus as the rock, they also identify him with Jehovah, on the mathematical principle that "things equal to the same thing are equal to each other." By establishing Jesus as a rock in Zion, God also proclaims him as the divine rock upon which his people are to build. Texts identifying God as "the Rock" or "my rock" are frequent in the Old Testament. So Paul's use of the image is evidence of his belief in the deity of Jesus Christ.

This was an offense to Israel, of course. In fact, it was the root or foundational offense they found in Paul's teaching.

Paul spoke about this in an autobiographical way in 1 Corinthians, saying that the gospel of Jesus and his cross was "weakness" to the Romans, "foolishness" to the Greeks, but a cause of "stumbling" to the Jews:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things —and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

1 Corinthians

1:22-25, 27-
29

I find those three problems in preaching the gospel today. I am not dealing with Greeks, Romans, and Jews specifically. But I do find that some people reject Christianity because they consider it a religion for weaklings; they don't need "religion." Others reject it because it seems foolish; it doesn't conform to the "wisdom" of our secular, scientific age. Still others reject it because the idea of a divine Son of God is an offense to them; they do not understand why they cannot "save" themselves.

Three More Causes of Offense

However, it is not only the deity of Jesus Christ that was and is offensive—to Israel and other peoples. There are other matters, too, and the passage in 1 Corinthians suggests at least three more of them.

1. *A stone is a "lowly" thing.* As an illustration, it points to Jesus' humanity and low estate. Most people enjoy getting to know other people they consider important, and they are often delighted to be seen with them or to be a part of their cause. If Jesus had come in the splendor of his divine glory accompanied by legions of angels, the people would have rallied to his side. But this is not how he came. He came as a helpless baby, born of poor parents in a distant region of the Roman Empire, and during his lifetime he moved among the poorest of the poor and was pleased to be one of them. The only "important" people he ever met were Pilate and Herod, and that was only when he was on trial before them. Jesus seemed to be insignificant.

It was as Isaiah said elsewhere: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, / nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. / He was despised and rejected by men, / a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering..." (Isa. 53:2-3).

A "stone that causes men to stumble" is not one that is placed in some high position in a cathedral tower. It is one that is neglected, one that is

lying inconspicuously on the ground.

2. *The gospel must be received by faith.* This is the point Paul makes in the first half of verse 32, in which he introduces the image of the "stumbling stone." He asked why Israel, which was pursuing righteousness, had not attained it, and he answered, "Because they pursued it not by faith but as it were by works." Salvation is God's gift. So salvation must be received as a gift from God or not at all. If we think we can earn it (or if we insist on earning it), it cannot be ours.

Robert Haldane says, "A free salvation becomes an offense to men on account of their pride.
They cannot bear the idea of being indebted for it to sovereign grace, which implies that in themselves they are guilty and ruined by sin. They desire to do something, were it ever so little, to merit salvation, at least in part."

3. *God saves whom he will.* The third offense is the one Paul has been elaborating in this chapter as a whole: God's sovereignty in election. God saves whom he will, and he rejects whom he will. Of all the doctrines in the Bible, there is none, in my opinion, so offensive to normal human beings as this, which is probably why even pastors and serious Bible teachers often avoid teaching from this chapter.

I have already quoted Robert Haldane several times, because he is particularly good on this section. Here is a third and final quote:

There is nothing which more clearly manifests the natural opposition of the mind of man to the ways of God, than the rooted aversion naturally entertained to the obvious view of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God held forth in this ninth chapter of the epistle to the Romans.

Self-righteous people, as is not to be wondered at, hold this doctrine in the utmost abhorrence; and many even of those, who are in some measure taught of God to value [this] great salvation, are reluctant to come to the serious study of this part of his Word. Even when they are

not able plausibly to pervert it, and when their consciences will not allow them directly to oppose it, with the Pharisees they say that they do not know what to make of this chapter. But why are they at a loss on this subject? What is the difficulty which they find here? If it be "hard to be understood," does this arise from anything but the innate aversion of the mind to its humbling truths? Can anything be more palpably obvious than the meaning of the apostle? Is there any chapter in the Bible more plain in its grammatical meaning? It is not in this that they find a difficulty. Their great difficulty is that it is too obvious in its import to be perverted. Their conscience will not allow them to do violence to its language, and their own wisdom will not suffer them to submit to its dictation....

... ought not believers to renounce their own wisdom and look up to God in the spirit of him who said, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

I have spoken thus far of four great offenses of the gospel: (1) the deity of Jesus Christ; (2) his humanity and humble estate; (3) that the gospel must be received by faith rather than being earned by works; and (4) that salvation is according to God's sovereign election and calling.

Four great stones for stumbling!

But now I ask, "Why should God create a gospel that is so offensive?"

This is not the way a modern advertising executive would do it. He would try to make the gospel as attractive as possible. He would try to make it fit "felt needs." That is the way to get a hearing. That is the way to sell a product. Doesn't God understand the techniques of good marketing? The answer, of course, is that God knows exactly what he is doing. And what he is doing is to humble human pride, which is absolutely necessary if you or I or anybody else is to be saved. It is our pride that has gotten us into trouble in the first place. Pride is the very root of sin. There can be no salvation unless our pride is cut down, torn up by the roots, and cast out, which is what the gospel does. When pride

is destroyed, then, and only then, are we ready to believe in Jesus and begin to build upon him.

Capstone of Biblical Religion

This leads us to the next step in understanding this important Scripture illustration. According to Scripture, the "stumbling stone" is meant to be the capstone of biblical religion and thus the foundation on which to build any stable life. To see this we need to trace a few other uses of the image of the stone in the Bible.

The starting point is Psalm 118:22, which says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."

There is a story behind this verse, though it is not in the Bible. It is a two-thousand-year-old tradition that has come down to us from the time of the building of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. The stones for that temple were quarried away from the temple site, according to detailed plans supplied by the temple architects, and they were transported to the temple site and assembled there without the noise of stonecutting tools. Early in the construction a stone was sent that did not seem to fit the temple. Since the builders did not know what to do with it, they laid it aside and forgot it. Later, when they were ready to place a large capstone on the now nearly completed structure and sent to the quarry for it, they were told that it is was not there, that it had already been sent up. The builders searched for it and eventually found the stone that had been laid aside. When they lifted it to its proper place in the building, it fit perfectly.

Thus, "the stone the builders rejected [became] the capstone." Jesus quoted this verse from Psalm 118 once when he was speaking to the religious leaders who were looking for ways to arrest him. He had told two stories meant to expose their hardhearted rejection of him. In the first they were portrayed as a son who said he would work in the father's vineyard but did not do it. In the second they were portrayed as wicked tenants of a rich man's field, who plotted to steal it and eventually killed the heir. When he had finished these stories, Jesus

said, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: / 'The stone the builders rejected / has become the capstone; / the Lord has done this, / and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" (Matt. 21:42; pars. Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17).

The disciples seem to have heard this, because later Peter quoted the verse in the same way and with the same application when he and John were put on trial before the Sanhedrin following Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Peter told the religious leaders, "Jesus Christ of Nazareth... is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone'" (Acts 4:10-11).

The Living Stone and God's Temple

We come now to what I regard as the definitive treatment of this image in the Bible, namely,
Peter's handling of it in his first letter. We have seen how Paul quoted Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16 in Romans 9, and how Jesus and Peter himself quoted Psalm 118:22 in Matthew 21:42 (with parallels) and Acts 4:11. In this great passage—1 Peter 2:4-8—Peter draws all three texts together to show how those who believe on Jesus build their lives on him and are made part of a spiritual temple, the church, which God is constructing:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

> "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone,
> and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

> "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,"
>
> and,
>
> "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

In view of this passage, I cannot see how anyone can imagine that when Jesus told Peter that "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), he was teaching that Peter was to be the foundation on which he would build his church. The errors of the supremacy of the Roman pontiff and the infallibility of the pope when speaking *ex cathedra* are constructed on this text. But these are terrible errors, and they are certainly not what Peter himself understood the Lord's words to mean.

In the Greek language in which the New Testament is written, there is a pun on the word *Peter.* The Greek word for Peter is *petros,* which means a piece of rock and can mean something as small as a slingshot stone or pebble. But when Jesus said, "On this *rock* I will build my church," the word he used was *petra* (a feminine form of the same root word), which means "bed rock." It was as if he were saying, "You are a little pebble, *Petros,* but I am going to build my church on myself, because I am the bed rock, *petra*. I am the only foundation on which anyone can securely build."

It was the same thing Jesus was getting at toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount in his illustration of a house built on a solid foundation. He said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock" (Matt. 7:24-25). Those who do not build their lives on Jesus and his

teaching are like houses built on sand, which are washed away by any sudden tempest.

I suppose there were people even in Peter's day who imagined that Jesus was going to build his church on Peter, which is why Peter, rather than some other New Testament writer, gives us this definitive explanation of the image of Christ as the rock. I suppose he is saying, "Don't think of me as the rock. I am as unstable as a pebble. Haven't you read my story? Build your life on Jesus
Christ."

Building on the Rock

Which is my conclusion, as well as the conclusion of the ninth chapter of Romans. If you will not have Jesus Christ, he will become a stumbling stone to you that will cause you to fall spiritually. That fall will mean your eternal destruction. But if you trust in him, you will find him to be the foundation stone that God has himself established, and you will learn, as you live the Christian life, that "the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Barnhouse sums up the situation wisely:

Men look for something big. God put Christ into this world as a low-lying stone, hid away among the long grass of a distant Roman province. Men held their eyes too high and walked across the world, not seeing Christ as God's only answer to their problems, and they tripped over him and stumbled when they came upon him suddenly. They were offended by a scheme of salvation which brings man to nothingness, and they refused God's way.

But, Barnhouse says, there are some who have accepted God's way:

They have come through the tangled grass of this world with their eyes low upon their own bleeding feet, scarred with their walk on the road of sin. When they have come to this stone, they have been willing to stand on it and ask for nothing further. They have believed God's word about the Lord Jesus Christ as being the only way of salvation. They have

abandoned their goal, their road, their strength, their pride, and have taken their stand squarely on the Lord Jesus Christ. To them comes the trumpeted promise from the God of the universe: "Whoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed."

To be "ashamed" means to be utterly confounded in the day of God's final judgment of the world and all persons. It means standing before God with your mouth firmly shut, with nothing to say in your defense as your deeds are read out, their evil judged by the standard of the perfect holiness of God, and your condemnation pronounced in terms so terrible that you will wish to have the mountains fall on you to protect you from the wrath of God or a flood to sweep you from his presence. On that day, your condemnation will be certain unless you are in Jesus Christ. Before it comes, be sure your feet are planted firmly on the Rock.

Chapter 139.
A Prayer for Israel

Romans 10:1-2

Have you ever worked with someone for a long time and been so frustrated with his or her lack of response to your help or teaching that eventually you have just written the person off, saying,
"I've done the best I can. He is going to have to learn the hard way." Or perhaps you said, "Whatever she has coming to her is her own fault."

I am sure all of us have reacted that way at some time about someone. So we should not be surprised in our reading of Romans 9-11 if we should find the apostle Paul doing the same thing, due to the unbelief of his countrymen. In fact, far from being surprised, we would be understanding and sympathetic, especially knowing how badly he had been treated by some of them.

But this is not what we find Paul doing.

Instead of dismissing his countrymen and consigning them to some bad end, we find that Paul is praying for them, which is what each of us should do for those who are unbelieving or who try to create problems for Christians who are witnessing to them about Jesus.

The Flow of Paul's Argument

If you have been studying Romans 9-11 closely, you may have noticed something interesting about each of these three chapters. Each one begins with an expression of intense concern by Paul for his own people. In Romans 9 he says that he has "great sorrow and increasing anguish" in his heart for Israel. In Romans 11 he declares that "God did not reject his people," even though, on their part, the rejection of Jesus by the majority might suggest it. In the chapter we are now studying, Romans 10, he protests that his "heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they might be saved."

Paul is grieving because of widespread Jewish unbelief, and it is probably because of this feature that the ancient Bible editors divided the chapters as they did.

Yet the first verse of Romans 10 is not actually the beginning of a new section, which you will realize if you remember the outline I gave for these chapters earlier. As I pointed out at the start of this volume, Paul is responding to the erroneous assumption that the promises of God have failed, because the Jews as a whole have not believed on Jesus. He is giving seven reasons why that assumption is wrong, and Romans 10 is part of the third of these responses, which begins with Romans 9:30. The third response is that the promises of God have not failed in regard to Israel, because the failure of the Jews to believe is their own fault, not God's, just as the failure of a Gentile or anybody else to believe is his or her own fault and not God's. The reason people do not believe is that they are trying to earn salvation by their own good works. And they are proud of their efforts, which is why they refuse to receive salvation as God's gift.

This argument continues in one form or another throughout Romans 10, and a new argument does not start until Romans 11.

This means that the first two verses of Romans 10, which we are starting to study now, are linked to the last verses of Romans 9, and it is exactly this that makes the first two verses of Romans 10 so compelling. Paul has just said that the failure of the Jews to believe was due to the mistaken notion that they could earn their own salvation by good works. But, instead of writing them off at this point, as we might have done, Paul immediately goes on to show that he is concerned about them and is continuing to pray for them.

The word translated "desire" by the New International Version is a rare word that actually suggests the idea of "good pleasure" or "delight." So what Paul is saying is that what would really please or delight him would be the salvation of his countrymen.

Therefore, he does what he can, which is to pray for them. His "prayer to God for the Israelites is that they might be saved" (v. 1).

Praying Always

This is a very simple prayer, but like most Bible prayers it suggests a number of important truths. The first is that prayer is always worthwhile.

The previous chapter of Romans has been on election, and this one is on the fact that the failure of Israel to believe on Jesus is their fault rather than God's, as I have said. Each of these points would seem to be a legitimate reason not to pray. But apparently neither one is a good reason, since Paul is praying. The fact that God elects some to salvation and passes by others does not stop him from praying, and the fact that failure to believe is a human failure rather than a divine failure does not stop him from praying. If he doesn't stop praying because of God and doesn't stop because of man, obviously he doesn't stop at all, which means that he was always accustomed to be praying for the salvation of other people.

He said exactly this when he was writing to the Thessalonians, telling them to "pray continually" (1 Thess. 5:17).

I suppose the problem does not seem to be so great on the human side, since most of us really do believe in prayer. Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, said that "it is possible to move men, through God, by prayer alone." We agree on the human side. But what about the divine side? If God has made his decision to save some and pass by others, isn't it useless or even foolish to pray, not to mention presumptuous?

Paul did not seem to think so.

Here is the way John Murray highlights and then resolves the issue:

In the preceding chapter the emphasis is upon the sovereign and determinative will of God in the differentiation that exists among men. God has mercy on whom he will and whom he wills he hardens. Some are vessels for wrath, others for mercy. And ultimate destiny is envisioned in destruction and glory. But this differentiation is God's action and prerogative, not man's. And, because [it is] so, our attitude to men is not to be governed by God's secret counsel concerning them. It is this lesson and the distinction involved that are so eloquently inscribed on the apostle's passion for the salvation of his kinsmen. We violate the order of human thought and trespass the boundary between God's prerogative and man's when the truth of God's sovereign counsel constrains despair or abandonment of concern for the eternal interests of men.

There is even more that can be said. Murray is saying that we cannot know the mind of God in regard to the salvation of sinners. Therefore, we should always pray for them. But we can also add that one way in which God works to call sinners to repentance is through prayer. So, when we pray, God answers our prayers and saves those for whom he moves us to pray.

The theological way of expressing this is to say that God always ordains the means to some goal as well as the ends. So, if he has ordained to

save a certain individual through our prayers, it is as necessary that we pray for that individual as it is that the individual be saved. Indeed, we must pray, since the individual will not be saved apart from the ordained intercession.

This should encourage us to pray.

George Müller of Bristol, England, the founder of the great faith orphanages, was a man of outstanding prayer. In his youth he had two friends for whom he began to pray. He kept notes on his prayers, and his notes show that he prayed for them for more than sixty years. One of these men was converted just before Müller's death at one of the last services Müller held. The other became a Christian within a year of Müller's funeral. Toward the end of his life, but before his friends' conversions, someone asked Müller why he was still praying for them after such a long time, since they had shown no response. He answered, "Do you think God would have kept me praying all these years if he did not intend to save them?" It was a point Paul would easily have understood.

The Greatest Prayer of All

The second truth we can see in Paul's prayer for his countrymen in Romans 10 is that the most important of all prayers are that those for whom we are praying might "be saved."

We are to pray about all sorts of things. Jesus himself said, "My Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 16:23b). He instructed us to ask God for "our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). He said, "Pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). The apostle Paul added, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). I assume this means that we are to pray for peace, national prosperity, and for wisdom and righteousness on the part

of those who rule over us. The items for which we are invited to pray are innumerable.

But Jesus also said something we need to think about carefully. "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26a). This means that, however good it is to have peace and enjoy a reasonable measure of prosperity, these and countless other things count as next to nothing (or worse than nothing) if we acquire them and yet fail to receive God's salvation.

Remember that, when you are praying for other people. When you pray for your children, pray that they might do well in school, that they might be kept from sin, that they will develop winsome personalities and make worthwhile contributions in life. But do not fail to entreat God for their salvation. They can gain all these other things. Yet, if they are not saved, they will lose it all, and these other things by themselves may even be a hindrance to their turning from faith in themselves to trust Jesus. Learn to think biblically, and then pray biblically, too. And do that, not only for your children but for your parents, friends, and whomever else God puts it upon your mind to pray for.

Could My Zeal No Respite Know

The third truth in Paul's prayer for his countrymen is found in the verse that follows it, where he says, "I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (v. 2). This means that zeal is no substitute for conversion. Even the zealous must be saved.

When Paul speaks of Jewish zeal in the matter of religion, he was speaking from experience and of something well known to everyone, which means that this statement was not flattery but an honest admission of a great Jewish strength. No doubt there were numbers of secular-minded Jews in that day, as in ours. But for the most part the Jews took their religion very seriously. Paul had done so himself. He had come to Jerusalem from Tarsus in modern-day Turkey, had studied under the great Jewish rabbi Gamaliel, and had thrown himself into the

propagation and defense of Judaism with a zeal few even among the Pharisees could match. Years later, in writing to the Philippians, he claimed that he had proved his zeal for God by persecuting the Christians (Phil. 3:6). As far as zeal went, Paul knew whereof he spoke.

But all of his zeal could not save him. And, in fact, his zeal was so misdirected that for a long time it actually kept him from Christ. It was only when Jesus revealed himself to him on the road to Damascus that Paul realized what he had been doing and committed himself to follow Christ from that time forward. In itself, zeal is a neutral thing. Before this, Paul had used it to attempt to destroy the work of God, though in ignorance. After he had met Jesus, he used it to proclaim the gospel and advance Christ's kingdom.

Paul acknowledged the zeal of his countrymen. Yet he still regarded them as lost, prayed for them fervently, and worked tirelessly for their salvation.

This is extremely relevant in our mindless, pluralistic, all-accepting society. For there is a common error that says that as long as a person is sincere, it does not really matter what he or she believes. In our day we are supposed to be open to everyone's version of the truth. Not long ago I got a letter expressing exactly this view and criticizing me because I had said that unbelieving Jews (as well as unbelieving Gentiles) are lost and need to repent of their sin and believe on Jesus. The writer wondered how anyone could preach such a "narrow, hateful" gospel in this age.

That is quite understandable, given the mind-set of most people today. But it only shows how far our culture has moved from Christianity. Why? Because the religion of Jesus is not "allaccepting," except in the sense that anyone may repent of his sin and come to Jesus. On the contrary, Christianity teaches that all are lost and that even the religiously zealous are not saved by zeal alone.

We are saved by Christ alone, received by faith alone. Anything else is not true Christianity.

The Path to Conversion

The fourth and last truth expressed in Paul's prayer for his countrymen is that the necessary first step to conversion, which all persons need, is knowledge. I say this because of the very last phrase of verse 2, which notes that the problem of the Jews was not their zeal itself. In itself zeal can be a very good thing. It was rather that "their zeal is not based on knowledge."

What was the problem? The next verse, which we will come to in the following study, explains it. It was their ignorance of the righteousness of God. Like Luther, many centuries later, they thought that the righteousness God requires of us is human righteousness, that is, a development of character or a collection of good works of which we ourselves are capable. What they did not understand is that the righteousness God requires is divine righteousness. And since it is divine and not human, the only way it can be obtained is from God himself as a free gift. It is what Paul was writing about earlier in Romans, in the chapters in which he was explaining the gospel.

Which is why he was writing it. If the problem was the Jews' lack of knowledge, the solution was to share or communicate that knowledge. To put it in other language, the task is to teach the Word of God.

This means that Christianity is primarily a teaching religion. It is and always has been. In fact, this was the primary thrust of Jesus' three-year ministry. You say, "But didn't Jesus come to be good to people, to heal them of their diseases?" No. He did that, but his primary ministry was to teach them the way of salvation, and to provide for it by himself dying for sin and then rising from the dead.

There is an excellent example of this in the first two chapters of Mark's Gospel. The first chapter of that Gospel tells us that John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance and that after John was put in prison, Jesus picked up the teaching ministry by "proclaiming the good news of God" (v. 14). This theme carries on throughout the chapter. Verse 21 tells us that Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum, where

"Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The next verse says that "the people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority...." Later we find the people exclaiming, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!" (v. 27). Teaching is prominent in the chapter.

Now notice what follows. Verse 29 says that Jesus was brought to the home of Peter, whose mother-in-law was sick, and Jesus healed her. The word of the healing soon spread, and before long a large crowd of diseased people had gathered at the door, and Jesus healed them. Night came. Everyone went to sleep. But early in the morning, while everyone else was sleeping, Jesus got up and went out to a solitary place where he prayed.

Soon the disciples also got up, and by this time the crowd of sick people had regathered at Peter's house. The crowd was probably even larger than the night before. So when his disciples realized that Jesus was not in the house, they went looking for him, and when they found him they protested, "Everyone is looking for you!" (v. 37). They meant, "What are you doing out here? This is your great opportunity. Your healing of the sick has been a huge success."

Jesus didn't return to Capernaum. Instead he replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (v. 38).

Wasn't it important to heal the sick? Perhaps. It was certainly a good thing to heal them. But it was not as important to heal as it was to teach, and in this case the pressure to heal the sick was beginning to detract from Jesus' teaching ministry. Jesus abandoned the former in order to pursue the latter. He had come to teach, and he was determined that nothing would keep him from that all-important work.

It was the same with the apostles in the early days of the church. In those days there was a problem with the administration of money for the widows. But rather than dealing with it themselves, the apostles asked the church to elect deacons to oversee the work because, they

said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables" (Acts 6:2).

Paul did miracles. We are told about some of them in Acts. He also spoke in tongues (1 Cor. 14:18). But he said, "In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in [an unknown] tongue" (v. 19).

Why did Jesus, the apostles, and Paul think along these lines? Why did they concentrate on teaching? Clearly, because Christianity must be according to right knowledge, and they knew that proper teaching was the necessary first step in any individual's conversion.

Prayer and the Ministry of the Word

And yet, proper teaching is not the only step. In the Greek text of these verses it is significant that the word Paul uses for "knowledge" is not the simple Greek word *gnosis*, which gave its name to the Gnostic movement and means "factual knowledge" pure and simple. The word he used is the compound word *epignosis*, which adds the idea of "knowledge that is according to godliness or with understanding." According to Paul, the Jews had *gnosis*. What they lacked was *epignosis*, which is why he was praying for them.

Don't miss the importance of that. Paul dedicated his life to bringing the knowledge of the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. But he recognized, even as he did so, that no one, either among the Jews or among the Gentiles, would believe on Jesus as his or her Savior unless God opened the person's mind to understand the gospel and regenerated the person's soul to believe and receive salvation. So Paul prayed that God would do the necessary work, even as he did his part preaching and praying for them.

Remember that is what Jesus did, too. He left Capernaum to spend time alone in prayer, and it was after such a time that he determined to keep on teaching, rather than redirecting his ministry to become a miracle worker.

And so did the apostles. They told the early church, "We will turn this responsibility over to [the deacons] and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:3-4). Prayer and preaching. The teaching of the Word of God plus intercession for those who are to hear it!

This must be our pattern, too.

Chapter 140.
Two Kinds of Righteousness

Romans 10:3

Most people today are impatient with precise definitions, especially theological definitions or definitions of biblical words, which do not mean much to them in any case. I have had people tell me, "I tune out whenever you start talking about words." This is because they are impatient with precision about almost anything. Yet some things require precision.

You cannot send a satellite into orbit, wire a house, diagnose an illness, prepare an accurate financial balance sheet, nor do hundreds of other important things without being precise. In the same way, you cannot make much progress in learning about God without precision, since God is himself precise and is the source of all precision. One of the words we have to be precise about is "righteousness," which Paul uses twice in Romans 10:3 and many times more in the verses that come immediately before and after it. This is because, as one writer says, "the issues of life and death, of time and eternity, hang upon a proper understanding of the righteousness of God and our relationship to it."

We have difficulty with this, however, and the biggest difficulty is that our ideas of righteousness are completely different from God's idea of righteousness. This is what Romans 10:3 is saying, of course. It is saying that there are two kinds of righteousness, ours and God's, and that the basic spiritual failure of human beings is that they are so

pleased with their own righteousness that they will not have the righteousness of God, which they need if they are to be saved from sin.

The opening word of the text is "since." It introduces the reason for the charge made in the preceding verse, namely, that the zeal of Paul's countrymen was "not based on knowledge." It was a zeal that was ignorant of the precise, accurate meaning of this word.

"Righteousness" in Romans

It would be a fair statement to say that one cannot understand the Bible without understanding what it has to say about righteousness. To be sure, there are books of the Bible that do not use that word. But the pivotal books do, and Romans in particular uses the word a great deal. "Righteousness" is found thirty-three times in Romans, as compared with seven times each in Matthew and 2 Corinthians, which are the books using it most frequently except for Romans. The word occurs eight times alone in Romans 9:30 through 10:6. The longer phrase, "the righteousness of God," is found eight times, one of these also being in our text.

Righteousness is prominent in the Old Testament, too, being linked with the name of God hundreds of times. In a valuable note on "the righteousness of God" in his Romans commentary, the Australian scholar Leon Morris points out how with us righteousness is an ethical virtue, but that with the ancient Hebrews righteousness was first and foremost a legal standing. God is righteous, so righteousness in man is that which enables us to stand before him: "The man who is ultimately righteous is the one who is acquitted when tried at the bar of God's justice."

Yet here is the problem. God is the only righteous one. We are not righteous. So who is able to stand before God or be acquitted in his court? The answer is: No one, unless God provides his own righteousness for us as a free gift.

This is what Paul has been explaining in Romans and will continue to explain in this important tenth chapter.

Our Righteousness and God's

A few paragraphs ago I wrote that it is hard for us to understand the meaning of righteousness, because our ideas of it are so completely different from God's. But one thing we should be able to understand clearly is the meaning of our text when it distinguishes sharply between our righteousness (human righteousness) and God's. It is saying that although we use the same word when we are talking about God's righteousness and our righteousness, we are actually speaking about two entirely different things.

God's righteousness is his very nature, for God *is* righteous, just as God *is* love. It is associated with his holiness and is perhaps better discussed as that word. Holiness is what sets God apart. It is what makes him utterly unlike us. Human righteousness is merely a social quality achieved by the avoidance of certain gross forms of depravity and the contrary accumulation of outwardly good deeds. It is what enables people to live with each other in partial peace, when each person actually wants everything in life, as well as all other persons, to focus on himself.

Because they are two different things, the accumulation of human righteousness through avoiding evil and performing good deeds can never add up to the true, divine righteousness that God requires of us if we are to be saved from sin and have fellowship with himself.

Let me give a few illustrations.

When I was thinking about this theme during the week I was preparing this material, I remembered when I was in college and my roommate and I were talking. He was a music major. He had been playing a violin concerto on the stereo, and I was humming along, making a noise to mimic the violin. He found my noise offensive and asked whether that was really the way a violin sounded to me. It was a put-down. I told him I was doing the best I could and asked him to make a noise like he

thought a violin should sound. I am not competent to judge whether his noise was more like a violin than my noise. I suppose, because he was the music major, that his noise was closer, though I don't know that for sure. But one thing I do know: No sound that either of us made was anything like a real violin. Our noise and the sound of a violin are in two entirely different categories and will remain so.

Here is an illustration I have used before. I have imagined a situation in which a platoon of American soldiers is captured by soldiers from the north during the Vietnam War and put in a prisoner-of-war camp. The American soldiers have no money and have to barter for whatever one soldier has and another soldier wants, which is a not very satisfactory arrangement. But one day a CARE package arrives, and in it is a game of Monopoly. The soldiers are delighted, not because of the game but because of the money. They divide it up, each man getting an equal number of white, pink, green, blue, beige, and gold bills (except for the sergeant, who gets an extra $500). Now, whenever one soldier has an extra cigarette and a second soldier wants it, the first can sell it to him for $100, or whatever. The money is very useful.

In any group of Americans there is always one who is a born capitalist, and this group is no exception. The capitalistic solider knows how to buy low and sell high, and as a result of his dealing it is not long before he has accumulated nearly all the money in the camp.

About this time there is a prisoner-of-war exchange, and this platoon of soldiers is air-lifted to Danang and then to a base in the Hawaiian Islands. Not long after this, our capitalistic soldier arrives home in San Francisco. The first thing he does after greeting his family is go downtown to the Wells Fargo Bank, make his way to the clerk dealing with new accounts, and tell her that he wants to open an account in the bank. "That's good," the teller says. "We like to see servicemen coming to the Wells Fargo. How much money would you like to start your account with?"

The soldier responds by pushing his Monopoly money across the counter. "$1,534,281," he says. The teller takes one look at it and calls

the manager, because it is obvious to her that the soldier is suffering brain damage from his confinement.

The Monopoly money might have helped this man get along very well in the prisoner-of-war camp, and even in America it could be used to play games. But it is no use at all in the world of American commerce. In that world you need genuine American greenbacks from the U.S. Treasury.

My third illustration is from Paul's description of his conversion in Philippians 3. He writes there how he had spent the early years of his life trying to accumulate righteousness, which he thought would make him acceptable to God, and he lists the things in which he had confidence:
"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:5-6). These items had to do with his birth, religious traditions, affiliations, personal zeal, and outward morality. He thought that was all he needed to attain heaven.

But then Jesus appeared to Paul when he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, and when he saw Jesus in his heavenly glory, a glory that blinded him, all his own righteousness faded away into darkness and seemed to him to be nothing.

I have sometimes said it was as if Paul had been considering himself a 100-watt light bulb, surrounded by people who were only 75-, 60-, and 25-watt light bulbs. But, when Jesus appeared to him, the righteousness of Jesus was like the brightness of the sun. When Paul realized that, he gave up trying to create his own righteousness and instead placed his faith in Jesus, which was the only sensible thing to do.

A Fatal Error

I have used three illustrations of how the righteousness of God and the righteousness of human beings are different things, because this is an important point and I hope to have driven it home by repetition. Yet I

admit that I worry about one thing as I do. Illustrations like this tend to trivialize the issue. They even make the distinction seem fun, when actually the matter is deadly serious, and the failure to distinguish our righteousness from divine righteousness has fatal consequences.

A feeling for the seriousness of the issue can be seen from Charles Hodge's observation on Romans 10:3. He wrote that the Jews' "ignorance on this point implied ignorance of the character of God, of the requirements of the law, and of themselves," obviously three important matters. He added rightly, "Those who err essentially here, err fatally; and those who are right here, cannot be wrong as to other necessary truths."

What Paul actually says is that those who failed to see the distinction I am making sought salvation in the wrong way. But that needs to be spelled out more fully. There are five fatal consequences of this error.

1. *Those who make it are satisfied with their own righteousness.* This is like a woman dying of some disease saying that she is sure everything is all right with her because her face looks good when she puts on her makeup. I have no doubt that a dying woman might look a great deal better with some makeup, particularly if she is very sick. But it is utter folly to trust the makeup and fail to see a doctor, if there is any chance that the doctor can detect the disease and cure it.

Yet this is exactly our folly. Millions of spiritually dying people are willfully ignorant of their true condition and instead trust their efforts to paint over the surface of their lives with human morality. Some do it with sacraments. They suppose that if they have been baptized or take communion regularly, they must be all right with God—since God himself proscribed these things—failing to see that these are meant to be signs of an inward change, not the reality itself, and that in any case they are not something that adds up to God's righteousness. Other people try the same approach by charitable giving, or by giving their time to volunteer causes. They suppose these acts of righteousness add up to God's righteousness. Because they are satisfied with what they

have done, they suppose that God must be satisfied, too. They fail to see that they are spiritually dying men and women.

2. *They look down on other people.* People who fail to distinguish between God's righteousness and human righteousness, and who are therefore satisfied with their own righteousness, inevitably look down on other people—whom they suppose to have achieved less. Because they have no high, absolute standard by which to judge themselves, they assume that they are somewhere near the top.

This is one reason why, in our natural sinful condition, we refuse to look up to God and his righteousness. If we were to look up, as Paul was forced to do on the road to Damascus, what we should be most conscious of is how far short we are of the divine requirements. In fact, we should realize that we are but light bulbs compared with the sun, and it would be foolish to boast of being brighter because we are a few watts above someone else. Seeing the righteousness of God humbles us and takes away all grounds for proud comparison. So we avoid it. We refuse to look up. Instead, we keep our eyes focused on other people and pat ourselves on the back because we imagine ourselves to be superior to them.

3. *They resent Jesus and his gospel.* This explains the next point, too, because when Jesus came to earth it was as if God brought down to our level the righteousness we in our fallen state refused to look up to or acknowledge.

It explains the fierce hatred of the leaders of Israel for Jesus when he was among them. Even people who do not trust Jesus as their own Lord and Savior generally acknowledge that he was a good man. He was gentle, kind, loving, and active in good works. Why is it that such a person should be as hated as Jesus was, hated even to the point of a trial and execution? The only explanation is that he was too good, too kind, too loving, too active in doing good works. In fact, his good was of such a high quality that anyone with any perception at all saw that it was otherworldly. That is, it was a divine righteousness rather than

being merely a human righteousness. It was unattainable and—this is the rub—an intolerable offense to people who before Jesus' coming considered themselves to be quite good and clearly better than others.

This is why Jesus had a much better reception among social outcasts than among the model members of the community. The outcasts had no illusions about themselves. They knew they were sinners. They were merely overwhelmed and happy to find that Jesus loved them. But the self-styled righteous people felt offended by Jesus, someone whose true righteousness exposed the limits and falseness of their own.

4. *They misunderstand and mishandle the law.* God gave the law to show that we are sinners, not for us to be saved by it. Paul has already made this point in Romans, and we studied it in some detail earlier. If we reject the revelation of God's true righteousness in Christ and suppose that we are doing well in our efforts to achieve our own righteousness, we will then use the law wrongly, misinterpreting it to require what we feel able to do and then praising ourselves for our achievement.

There is no better illustration of this than how differently the Pharisees and Jesus thought about the law. The Pharisees spent a great deal of effort defining what the particulars of the law meant. When the law said, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exod. 20:8), they asked,
"What does it mean to keep it holy?" The law said, "On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work" (v. 10). "But what is work?" they responded. Out of this type of thinking came an elaborate system of rules that proscribed how far you could walk on Saturday, what you could carry with you when you did walk, and the kind of activities you could pursue. It was the same way with each of the other commandments and with the many additional ordinances found in the first five books of the Old Testament. Following these regulations was a daunting task, an enormous burden, but this is precisely what the orthodox set out to do and believed they had accomplished. Paul was one of them himself

before his conversion on the road to Damascus. He said of himself, "as for legalistic righteousness, [I was] faultless" (Phil 3:6).

But how did Jesus think about the law? He got to the heart of the law's teaching in Matthew 5, saying, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment..." (vv. 21-22).

Jesus also argued, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (vv. 27-28).

And Jesus taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (vv. 43-44).

Jesus understood the law rightly. Therefore, if we, following his example, also use it rightly, which we refuse to do if we are satisfied with our own deficient righteousness, we will see that we can never measure up to this or any right standard and will turn to the mercy of God to save us from our sins, rather than plead our own corrupt morality as grounds for God's approval. If we see this clearly, we will acknowledge that we are condemned by whatever standard we choose, ours or God's, since at the deepest level we have all broken every right standard and will continue to do so.

5. *They will not submit to God's righteousness.* The final consequence of failing to see the difference between the righteousness of God and our own righteousness is that we will not submit to God's righteousness, which means acknowledging that we need it and seeking it in Christ, where alone it may be found. This is the point at which Paul closes his argument (Rom. 10:4), for everything else leads up to it.

Let me summarize. Paul says that the people of his day pursued a law of human righteousness but failed to achieve God's true righteousness because they sought it in the wrong way. They thought they could attain it by works, when it can be received only as a gift of God though

faith. The reason they sought it in the wrong way is that they were ignorant of these two types of righteousness. They trusted in their own righteousness and thought that, if they had enough of it, their righteousness would add up to the righteousness of God. Therefore, they did not abandon their own efforts and submit to God's righteousness.

"Cannot" or "Will Not"?

"Abandon" and "submit"!

That is exactly the problem. Although God tells us that our own good works will not save us, we love them too much to abandon faith in them. He tells us that we must submit to the gift of his righteousness in Jesus Christ, but we will not submit to righteousness. We say we cannot do it. We "cannot believe." We "cannot understand." We don't even like the distinctions. But God tells us that it is not a question of "cannot." The real problem is that we w*ill not,* and the reason we will not submit is our sin. One commentator says, "If we are not to be ignorant of God's righteousness, if we are to turn away from any attempt to establish our own righteousness, we must come to the place where we submit ourselves to the righteousness of God—as it is seen in... Jesus Christ."

Won't you do that?

As a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I urge you to bow your proud head and put your whole trust in Christ alone. There is no other way of salvation, not by knowledge, not by sacraments, not even by good works. The Bible says that he, that is, Jesus, "has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

Chapter 141.
Christ: The Fulfillment of the Law

Romans 10:4

I have learned many lessons in more than twenty years of Bible study and preaching, and one of the lessons is that things that seem simple often are not. Our text is an example. Romans 10:4 seems to be a very simple verse. After all, what could be more straightforward than the words "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes"? The verse has only seventeen words, less in Greek (nine words), and all but three of the English words have only one syllable.

Yet Romans 10:4 is a difficult verse to interpret.

And here is the interesting thing: It is the simple words (not the polysyllabics) that are the problem.

The two most problematic words are "end" and "law."

In his excellent commentary on Romans, the great Princeton Theological Seminary scholar Charles Hodge probably reduced the possible meanings of "end" as much as can reasonably be done, but he still speaks of three possible interpretations: (1) "the object to which any thing leads," (2) the "completion or fulfillment" of something, or (3) an "end or termination." In terms of our text, if the first meaning is the right one, the verse means that Jesus is that to which the law points so that, if it is properly used, the law will carry the one using it to him. If the second meaning is correct, the idea is that Jesus has himself perfectly fulfilled the law. If the third meaning is chosen, the verse means that Jesus has brought the dispensation of law to an end by dying for sin, rising again, and inaugurating the Christian Era. Obviously, something can be said for each interpretation.

Then, if you add to these difficulties the possible meanings of "law"—the law of Moses, a principle of conduct, the ceremonial law, or moral law—you can see how the difficulties of interpreting this verse proliferate.

How should we proceed?

I am convinced that in this case the most helpful procedure is not to argue the merits of the various possibilities, but to back off from the text

itself and instead ask, "How does Jesus Christ fulfill the law?" He does it in a variety of ways. After we have explored those answers, we can then come back to the text, interpret it, and apply it practically.

To Fulfill All Righteousness

The first way in which Jesus fulfilled the law, and thus became the end of the law, is that he kept it perfectly himself. In books written about Jesus' work, theologians usually distinguish between what they call Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience. Jesus' passive obedience refers to his willingness to accept death in conformity to his Father's will, according to Philippians 2:8:

> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became *obedient* to death— even death on a cross!

[emphasis added] Christ's active obedience refers to the way he carefully and deliberately kept the law of Moses in all respects.

This has several dimensions. It is usually said that Jesus fulfilled the *moral law* by obeying it perfectly; he was a perfect man. He fulfilled the *types and ceremonies* of the law by being the reality to which they pointed and by accomplishing in his death what they symbolized; thus, he was himself the perfect sacrifice for sins to which the daily sacrifices and the great sacrifices on the Day of Atonement pointed. Jesus fulfilled the *prophecies* by living them out to the letter.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus referred explicitly to two of these areas (and probably the third) when he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17).

In the story of Jesus' baptism, according to Matthew, there is a sentence that has bearing on Jesus' fulfillment of the law. John the Baptist had been alerted by God as to who Jesus was. So, when Jesus came to John to be baptized, John demurred, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). John had been teaching about

the Messiah's work in baptizing with the Holy Spirit in contrast to his own merely preparatory water baptism. So he meant that he needed to receive a baptism of the Holy Spirit from Jesus, rather than Jesus receiving any benefit from him.

But Jesus responded, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15).

This has been a puzzling statement to many people, since John's was a baptism for repentance and Jesus had committed no sin for which he needed to repent. But the reason for it seems clear enough.

On the one hand, since baptism signifies identification, it was by his baptism that Jesus willingly identified himself with all the other Israelites who were responding to John's preaching by turning from their sin to faith in the Messiah. That is, it was a symbol of the union of Jesus with the believer, a doctrine basic to Paul's theology. We looked at this earlier in these studies.

On the other hand, since Jesus speaks of fulfilling "*all* righteousness," it is clear that he also considered this act to be part of his conscious obedience to all that God required. Through John, God had commanded his believing people to be baptized. So Jesus was baptized.

However, the word that I think is most important in the exchange between Jesus and John the Baptist is "all." For by it Jesus was declaring his intention to fulfill *all* that God had required. He did this so well that his enemies were unable to accuse him of any wrongdoing, as much as they would have liked to. And God himself affirmed Jesus' perfect obedience to the law by declaring, just two verses later, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). This divine evaluation was repeated at the time of the transfiguration (see Matt. 17:5 and parallels).

It was because Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly that he was able to be our substitute in dying for us on the cross, truly "a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19).

This is the first part of the meaning of Paul's statement in Romans 10:4. It teaches that Christ is "the end of the law" in the sense that he fulfilled or satisfied the demands of the law completely.

Christ Our Righteousness

The second way Jesus became the end of the law is that he fulfilled the law on our behalf, so that now he is not only the source but is himself the righteousness of all who are joined to him by faith. This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 2 Corinthians 5:21: "Christ Jesus... has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption," and "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

This is what justification is about, and it is what Paul seems chiefly to be talking about in this section of Romans 9 and 10.

We know what Paul teaches about righteousness, of course. But if we can lay that knowledge aside for a moment and go back to look at the end of Romans 9 and the verses that come before our text in Romans 10, we can see at a glance that a major question is unanswered. Paul has contrasted a righteousness that is "by works" with a righteousness that is "by faith" (Rom. 9:32). He has defined the righteousness he is talking about as "God's righteousness," showing that it comes "from God" as opposed to righteousness that comes from ourselves (Rom. 10:3). But he has not said in so many words where this righteousness that is "by faith" can be found. Or, to put it in other terms, if righteousness is to be received "by faith" and faith has content, as it must if it is true faith, what is faith's object?

Those questions are answered by verse 4, which introduces the name of Christ for the first time since the opening paragraph of Romans 9. Jesus is faith's object. He is the one in whom is located the righteousness we need to be saved.

This justification, by which we stand or fall in the sight of the holy God, involves two corresponding transactions. On the one hand, if we are

believers, our sin has been transferred to Jesus Christ and was punished in him when he died in our place on the cross. That is why we sing:

My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought!—
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

On the other hand, his righteousness was transferred to us, with the result that we are now counted as being righteous in him.

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Both belong to justification, and both are true for anyone who has turned from sin and committed his or her life to Jesus Christ. It is what Paul has been writing about in much of the earlier portion of Romans and is reiterating in this passage.

So justification is another meaning of our text: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

Free at Last

Thus far we have been thinking of the word *end* as "fulfillment," or the "culmination" to which something tends. But "end" also sometimes means "termination," and this, too, is involved in Paul's statement. It teaches that Christ has ended the law as a system by which we are supposed to attain to righteousness. Or, to put it in other language, he has freed us from the law's bondage.

I have to be very careful how I say this, because nothing in this study is more apt to be misunderstood—and that from either of two perspectives.

First, I do not mean, as one commentator has written, that "Christ put a stop to the law as a means of salvation." The reason it cannot mean this

is that the law never was a means of salvation. Paul has spoken of the true purpose of the law in Romans 7, showing that the law was given to reveal the nature and extent of our sin and to point us to Jesus Christ as the only place salvation can be found. So, whatever "the end of the law" means, it clearly does not mean that Christ terminated it as a way of getting saved.

But neither does it mean the end of any continuing value for the law, for the law is part of Scripture, and "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). In fact, in Romans 3 Paul asked, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith?" and answered, "Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (v. 31). In Romans 7 he said, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (v. 12).

The best way of understanding this point is by something the apostle Peter said at the Council of
Jerusalem described in Acts 15. Representatives of the expanding church had gathered in
Jerusalem to decide the question of whether or not the Gentiles needed to submit to the law of Moses, which the Jewish church at that time upheld. It involved the ceremonial laws of Israel as well as the moral law, and the focal point of the debate was circumcision. Was it necessary for Gentile males to be circumcised to be Christians?

As you know, the council decided that it was not necessary. But the reason I refer to this debate is for something Peter said in the midst of it. He argued that God had saved the Gentiles without their becoming Jews, giving the Holy Spirit to them just as to Jewish converts. "Now then," he said, "why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10). The "yoke" was the law. So Peter was admitting that the law had been a burden for the Jews in the past and was arguing that it should not be imposed on the Gentiles, since even the Jews had been unable to sustain that harsh burden.

Does that mean that he was encouraging lawlessness, then? Not at all. He was encouraging righteousness, which is my next point. The council's decree reiterated some of the law's moral absolutes, but Peter was acknowledging that righteousness is not attained by legalism. That is, you do not become a better follower of Jesus Christ or a more holy person by adhering to a list of rules. The moral end of the law is attained by Christians, but it is attained by a different principle. It is by the life of Jesus Christ within the believer.

We need to remember that an entire book of the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Galatians, was written to combat the notion that Christians are to make their lives better or advance their discipleship by legalism. The Galatians were not saved by keeping the law but through faith, as Paul repeatedly points out. Therefore, why should they fall back into legalism? They should continue as they had started out. The main point of Galatians is summarized at the start of chapter 5: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

Righteousness in Us

This leads to my final point, because, whenever we speak of Jesus, the law, and righteousness, we need to say that Jesus has as his ultimate goal in saving us that we are to be a holy people. I need to add that I do not believe that is what *this verse* teaches. I think it is primarily teaching about justification—from the context and because Paul says that Jesus is the end of the law "so that there may be righteousness *for* everyone who believes." A righteousness *for* us is a righteousness imparted to us by God for Christ's sake. That is what Paul says.

But Paul also could have said, "... so that there may be righteousness *in* [or practiced by] everyone who believes," which would mean an actual righteousness to be attained by us.

How can I say this?

It is because Paul says it himself:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, *in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us,* who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:1-4, emphasis added

We are neither justified nor sanctified by the law. But those who are justified will also be progressively sanctified by the Spirit of Christ who lives within them, and this means that they will inevitably and increasingly live righteous lives. If they do not, they are not Christians.

Three Applications

I said at the start of this study that I wanted to return to some practical applications of our text, and I do that now. There are many, but I want to mention three.

1. *Christ is everything.* It is hard for us to imagine how important the law of Moses was for Jewish people living in Paul's day. The law is important for Jews today, of course, even though tradition has tended to replace a thorough knowledge of it. But it was more so then. The law was the very essence of Jewish religion. Yet Paul, who was himself a Jew, is telling us that Christ is the culmination, fulfillment, and (in a sense) termination of the law. For he "is the end of the law." It is a way of saying that everything that matters in salvation and religion is in him.

One commentator writes, "Instead of the temple it is to be Christ; instead of Moses, Christ; instead of Aaron, Christ; instead of the law, Christ; instead of ceremonies, Christ; instead of worship localized in a building, there is to be the eternal, omnipotent Christ." It is impossible to exalt the nature and place of the Lord Jesus Christ too much.

2. *If I am in Christ, I will never be condemned for breaking the law or be rejected by God.* How could I be, since Jesus has fulfilled the law on my behalf and has borne the punishment due to me for breaking it? He has become my righteousness.

3. *To be "in him" I must believe on him.* For the verse also tells me, "Christ is the end of the law... for everyone *who believes."* For everyone? Yes, but for everyone who believes. The promise is universal and specific.

In one of his books, Harry Ironside tells of a young woman he led to the Lord on one occasion. She had received a Christian upbringing, but she had thrown her heritage to the wind and had lived a worldly life. Now she was dying of tuberculosis and had sent for Ironside. She had been given three weeks to live. "Do you think there is any hope for a sinner like me?" she asked when she saw Ironside.

Ironside led her through the gospel, coming at last to John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

"Are you included in that 'whoever'?" he asked the woman.

By this point she was ready to commit herself to Christ and did so, and Ironside assured her that if she was truly in Christ there was no condemnation for her, even though she had lived a sinful life and was coming to Jesus at what was apparently the very end of it. John 3:18 said: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already...."

A month or so later, after Ironside had finished his meetings in that area and had gone elsewhere, he was told of her passing. Her minister had been with her. "Can you hear me?" he had asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Do you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?" he continued.

"Yes."

"What does he say about you?"

"Not condemned," she replied. And then, uttering her last words, "If you see Mr. Ironside, tell him it's all right."

It is all right, and will be. "For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

Chapter 142.
How Faith Speaks

Romans 10:5-9

We live in such a mindlessly pluralistic society that it is considered uncouth, if not wickedly immoral, to suggest that some religions may be better than others or, even worse, that some religions may be wrong. But some *are* wrong. In fact, all are wrong that do not call us out of our own inadequate self-righteousness to faith in Jesus Christ.

That is what Paul is saying in the extremely important paragraph to which our study of Romans has now brought us (Rom. 10:5-13). This paragraph is part of a longer section beginning with Romans 9:30 and running to the end of Romans 10, a section in which Paul is explaining that the unbelief of his countrymen is not God's fault but theirs, since the gospel had been communicated to them. The paragraph develops that analysis by contrasting what Paul calls "a righteousness that is by law" with "a righteousness that is by faith." But the verses we are studying (vv. 5-9) do more than this. They also describe three kinds of religion, pointing us away from the two wrong kinds of religion to the true religion that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord.

These three religions are: (1) the religion of works, (2) the religion of signs, and (3) the religion of faith. Paul develops them by telling us: (1) how legalism speaks, (2) how faith does not speak, and (3) how faith does speak.

How Legalism Speaks

The first religion is the religion of works. We already know a great deal about it because it is what Paul has been chiefly refuting all along. What is different about his treatment of the religion of works in this section is his confirming quotation from the law of Moses.

The quotation is from Leviticus 18:5, in which God is speaking to the Israelites through Moses, saying, "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD." This verse seems to have meant a great deal to Paul, for in addition to our text he also uses it in the letter to the Galatians. In Romans he says, "Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: 'The man who does these things will live by them.'" The Galatians passage reads, "The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things will live by them'" (Gal. 3:12). In both passages he contrasts the way of works with the way of faith and shows that they are mutually exclusive.

This point is all that is necessary for his argument. We need to keep that in mind, because without it we will get mixed up in our comparison of Moses' words with Paul's use of them.

In Leviticus, Moses seems to be telling the people that they need to keep the law and that, if they keep it, they will enjoy abundant life. That is true, of course. On the simplest level it is true that any person will be blessed to the extent that he or she lives according to the revealed law of God. That is only a way of saying that people who love God, keep the Sabbath, honor their parents, tell the truth, are faithful in their marriages, and do not steal or covet things that are not theirs will be happy. People who dishonor God, break faith, cheat, lie, and live for material possessions are miserable.

In addition, the text can be taken as saying that if the Jews would keep God's law to the extent that people can keep God's law, God would prosper the nation. This is also true. God will do the same at any time with any nation, ours included. He said, "If my people, who are called

by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14).

But Paul is not drawing these points from the quotation, and some who have noticed the difference have supposed that he is misusing it. That is not the case. Paul would readily acknowledge what I just said, namely, that morality is better than immorality and brings blessing. But he would add two important truths:

First, in religion we are talking about more than mere morality. We are talking about how a person can become right with God. If we approach the text at that level, allowing the word *live* to speak not merely of a happy life here but of eternal life, then we need to acknowledge that no one is able to keep the law of God well enough to reap this great benefit. It is true that anyone who is able to keep the law perfectly will be rewarded by God with eternal life. But nobody does keep the law perfectly. Therefore, salvation is beyond the grasp of those who are merely lawkeepers. Right standing before God must be sought in a different way entirely, and that is by faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior.

Second, Paul would add that the way of works and the way of faith cannot be mixed, which in my judgment is how he uses the text from Leviticus here. The way of works is the way of law, he says. If you think you are going to be saved by law, it is by keeping the law that you must try to be saved. But you cannot make up for your deficiencies by adding faith to it, just as it is also impossible to begin by faith and then add law.

The Galatians had been trying to add works to faith, which is why Paul cites the same Leviticus passage in his letter to them. He tells them that if they tried to add works to faith as a way of salvation, Christ and his work would be of no value to them (Gal. 5:2).

No one can be saved by a religion of works, however hard he or she tries. Many are trying. Most of the world's religions are works religions. But the Bible says that if you would be saved, you must give up any

thought of contributing to your salvation by what you do and instead trust Jesus Christ and his work completely. As one commentator says, Christ "charged himself with the *doing."* He has left us "only the *believing.*"

How Faith Does Not Speak

The second religion Paul writes about in these verses is the religion of signs and wonders, which he introduces as a way the religion of faith does *not* speak. The text reads, "But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the deep?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)" (vv. 6-7).

These verses introduce a second reference to the Old Testament. But they are not an exact quotation, which Paul seems to acknowledge by the way he brings the words in. In the earlier reference (to Leviticus) he said, "Moses describes in this way...." That means "Moses wrote" or even "God, through the hand of Moses, says." In this case, because he is handling the words loosely, Paul writes instead, "The righteousness that is by faith says...." This looser reference is to Deuteronomy 30:12-14.

In that passage Moses is speaking to the people, assuring them that God will bless the nation if they obey his commands and decrees:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

The point is that Israel had the law and that the law was all they needed. They were not to seek out an additional revelation but rather were to occupy themselves with obeying what they had already been given.

This is the passage Paul refers to, but he throws in an additional twist, explaining Moses' reference to ascending into heaven by adding "that is, to bring Christ down" and his reference to going beyond the sea (or descending into the abyss) by adding "that is, to bring Christ up from the dead." To most people those explanations do not do much to explain anything, not even Deuteronomy, and they even introduce confusion as to what Paul himself is saying.

What is Paul saying? What do those strange explanations mean?

In my opinion, this is not a case in which one explanation rather than others should be chosen, but rather a situation in which there are several overlapping or unfolding meanings. That is, a basic meaning is seen to contain additional meanings, and all are important. Each has bearing on what Paul wants to say in this passage.

Meaning number 1: *Israel did not need an additional word from God.* This is the literal meaning of the words in Deuteronomy, and although Paul adds specifically Christian interpretations to them, this meaning alone is true both for Israel and for the Christian community. As far as Israel is concerned, the people did not need an additional word from God, because, as Paul teaches elsewhere, the law itself contained announcements of the gospel. This was the point of Romans 4, where Paul showed that the doctrine of justification by faith was known to Abraham and David and was taught to Israel through their stories, as well as in other places.

As far as Christians are concerned, the same meaning holds. For neither do Christians need an additional word from God. They have what they need already, and it is the gospel message being proclaimed by the apostles: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Meaning number 2: *Israel did not need to do something in order to bring the Messiah to them.* This is the unique sense of what Moses said to the people. For we notice that he did not speak merely of waiting for

a new word from heaven or from beyond the sea but rather of "ascending" into heaven or "crossing" the sea to get it.

In his short but valuable book on Romans 9-11, the Danish Professor of New Testament Johannes Munck argues from rabbinical texts that "the Jews held that it would require an effort to bring the Messiah down from heaven. Israel must repent before the Messianic era can begin. " It is hard to say with certainty that this is exactly what Paul is thinking of, but the idea of doing something certainly fits this context. The Jews wanted to do something to earn their salvation. Yet even before the Messiah came they were not expected to do anything, only to believe God's word and look forward to him in faith, as Abraham, David, and the other Old Testament believers had done. Now it is even more apparent that this is the case. The Messiah has come. So there is no need to ascend into heaven to bring him down. He died for sin and has been resurrected. So there is no need to descend into the world of the dead to bring him back. All that is needed is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Meaning number 3: *Neither Israel nor Christians today are to look for miracles.* It is because of this meaning that I have spoken of "the religion of signs." It is part of this passage because, as nearly all commentators recognize, the expressions about ascending into heaven to bring Christ down and descending into the abyss to bring Christ up are proverbial expressions for what is clearly impossible. If someone could produce Christ or his power on demand, bringing him down from above or up from below, that person would be a miracle worker. But we are not to look for that, any more than we are to look for an additional revelation.

This matter is so important that I will return to it in the next study of what I call "The False Religion of Signs and Wonders." I am going to look at its contemporary manifestations.

Here I want to notice the evidence for this same false religion in Israel. Moses had been used by

God to do miracles, just as Jesus had done miracles in his lifetime. But at the end of
Deuteronomy, which is where these words come from, Moses is about to be taken away from the people, and they were understandably filled with anxiety about this. "Who is going to lead us when Moses, the miracle worker, is gone?" they would have been asking. What Moses tells them is that they do not need another miracle worker, since they have the law of God (which contains the gospel). What they need is very near them; in fact, it is already in their mouths and hearts (Deut. 30:14).

They were not satisfied with this, of course. They wanted miracles, and by the time of Jesus Christ they were actually demanding them. "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you," the unbelieving Pharisees and hostile teachers of the law brazenly demanded of Jesus (Matt. 12:38). He replied,

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

Matthew 12:39-42
Jonah did no miracles in Nineveh, yet Nineveh repented. Solomon did no miracles in Israel, yet the Queen of the South came to hear him speak. So the Jews' demand that Jesus give them a sign was actually an evasion, since their real problem was that they did not like what he was teaching. However, just as the "preaching" of Jonah reached the people of Nineveh and the "wisdom" of Solomon reached the Queen of the

South, so the word of the gospel is the means by which God saves sinners today.

Do miracles occur today? There are differences of opinion on this question. I believe they do at times, for God is not bound by anything, and he is obviously as able to do miraculous things today as he ever was. But we are not to seek miracles as part of the gospel presentation. For a religion of signs and wonders is as false a gospel as the religion of works. Both are attempts to do something that God has declared outside true Christian proclamation, and signs, as well as works, detract fatally from the message of Christ's atonement.

Faith's Confession

That brings us to the third of these religious systems, the one Paul has been urging all along. We have seen how faith does not speak. It does not call for signs. How, then, does faith speak? Paul gives the confession of true faith in verses 8 and 9: "But what does [faith] say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

I have said that in the next study we are going to go back and look at verses 6 and 7 for what they have to say about "The False Religion of Signs and Wonders." In the study after that we will come back to verses 8 and 9, studying them for the proper content of genuine "Christian preaching."

But we are studying three kinds of religion in this chapter: the religion of works, the religion of signs, and the religion of faith, and it is important even here to see the essence of this third, true religion.

First, it is a religion based on Jesus and his work alone. When we were looking at verse 4, one of the applications of that study was that "Christ is everything." He is "the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." It is the same here. For the message that is near us, in our mouths and hearts, is Jesus, and the

confession of faith through which we are saved is that "Jesus is Lord" and that God raised him from the dead. Those are not simplistic items, as we will see. They involve a great amount of biblical theology. But they are all about the Savior. That is my point. Christianity *is* Jesus Christ. So anything that detracts from him or his work is a false religion.

Second, faith is essential. We are not saved by works or miracles, but this does not mean that salvation is somehow extraneous to us in the sense that it happens mechanically. On the contrary, it is as intimate and life-transforming as anything could possibly be. It finds us as dead men and women, under the curse of God, and it changes us into spiritually regenerated people who now live under God's protecting love and blessing.

How does that happen? It happens through faith, which is what Paul has been saying all along.

Notice what happens to the language of the passage in verse 9. In verse 5 Paul has been quoting Moses. He tells us what Moses said. Verses 6 through 8 have been quoting "the righteousness that is by faith." They tell us how faith speaks. But what happens in verse 9? For the first time in many verses, the language shifts from the third person to the second person, emphasizing the word *you*. "That if *you* confess with *your* mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in *your* heart that God raised him from the dead, *you* will be saved."

Isn't that striking? It is the clearest means Paul could possibly have chosen to use in the context of explaining the nature of true religion and the essence of the true gospel: "*You* must believe it." It is not of works, and it is not in response to miracles. But it is of faith! Therefore, it is only those who believe on the Son of God who are saved.

This kind of religion is not calculated to stroke the fallen, Adamic ego, and it is not "spectacular" in a worldly sense. It will not win the attention of the world as would jumping unharmed from the pinnacle of the temple or casting out demons or predicting the future or healing the

sick or turning hurricanes aside. But it is God's true religion. And what is most important, it is the teaching God honors in accomplishing the most important miracle of all, namely, the regeneration of a dead soul, so that one who was formerly bound for hell is thereafter bound for heaven.

Are other things important? Some are, though to different degrees.

Not long ago I was speaking to a group of seminary students, and I was able to point out how a decade or two ago the preaching of biblical theology was pushed aside by psychology and how in our day the preaching of biblical theology is being pushed aside by sociology. Psychology has a place, I said. So does sociology. But what is most important—the one thing we absolutely cannot do without—is an exposition of the Bible that lifts up Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and calls upon all persons everywhere to turn from their sin and trust this risen Lord for their salvation.

Why? "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'" (Rom. 10:10-11).

Have you believed on Christ and confessed him before other people, as he commands you to do? Have you called on his name?

Remember, works will not save you. You cannot keep the law even if you want to, and deep in your heart you do not even want to keep it. And God is not going to give you miracles to titillate your religious appetite. Christ has already descended from heaven. He has already told us who God is and what he requires of us. Jesus has given his life for his people. He has already been raised from the dead. Therefore, the gospel is not far off. It is right here. It is in our mouths and in our hearts. All that remains is for you to embrace it personally and so pass from a false religion to the true one and thus from death to life.

Chapter 143.

The False Religion of Signs and Wonders

Romans 10:6-7

We are studying an important paragraph in Romans in which the apostle Paul: (1) compares three types of religion, (2) describes true religion as faith in "Jesus as Lord" and (3) explains how this true religion of faith is to be communicated. In other words, he is talking about the content of the gospel and how to do evangelism.

In our last study we looked at this paragraph in a general way in order to get an overview of the whole. But now, as I indicated then, we need to return to specific parts of it and examine each in detail. In this study we return to the religion of signs and wonders, as suggested by Paul's use of Deuteronomy 30:12-14, which he quotes with his own explanatory additions: "The righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the deep?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).
[It says,] 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart....'" (vv. 6-8).

If a person could ascend into heaven to bring Christ and his power down or into the deep to bring him up, that person would be a miracle worker. So Paul is saying, among other things, that miracles are not the way to do evangelism.

The Vineyard Movement

The reason I need to return to this mistaken notion is twofold. First, because people have a fascination with "signs and wonders," it is easy for anyone to get off the right track in this area. Second, there is a powerful movement within so-called evangelical Christianity that embraces and actively promotes this approach. It is called the Vineyard Movement, and it is associated with the name of John Wimber, founder and pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Pasadena, California, a church that started in his home in 1977 but has expanded

today to more than two hundred congregations scattered throughout the English-speaking world.

For a short time John Wimber taught as an adjunct professor at the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, which he refers to often to establish credibility. The course was called MC:510, "The Miraculous and Church Growth." From the material of this course Wimber produced a book, actually written by a man named Kevin Springer, titled *Power Evangelism.* This has been followed by another, titled *Power Healing*.

These books contain endorsements by such evangelical leaders as C. Peter Wagner of the Fuller Seminary School of World Missions, Michael Green of Regent College, and the popular evangelical authors Richard J. Foster and John White. So John Wimber's views are not to be taken lightly.

What, then, does Wimber teach? He has several points of emphasis.

1. *Spiritual warfare.* The starting point of John Wimber's theology is that Christians are involved in a spiritual battle against the devil and demonic forces. This is because the kingdom of God has come into the world as a result of Jesus' coming but is opposed by Satan's kingdom. Christians are Jesus' soldiers in this conflict, and they have been given authority to oppose Satan and cast him out. Wimber calls clashes between the kingdom of God, represented by Christians, and the kingdom of Satan "power encounters." They are tests of strength. Who is stronger? Who will win?

2. *Power evangelism.* It follows from this premise, according to Wimber, that the way to do evangelism is by miraculous demonstrations of the superior power of God, which he calls "signs and wonders." These involve such things as casting out demons, healing the sick, and receiving and acting upon special personal revelations from God about what another individual has done or is thinking, facts otherwise unknown to the evangelist. Wimber calls these revelations "words of knowledge."

It is important to realize that Wimber distinguishes at this point between what he is recommending and what he calls "programmatic evangelism." Programmatic evangelism is traditional evangelism. It is "message-oriented" and appeals to "rational arguments." It "attempts to reach the minds and hearts of people without the aid of charismatic gifts." It is evangelism, but because its goal is "decisions for Christ" instead of making disciples, the people reached by it "do not move on to a mature faith.... There is something inadequate about their conversion experience."

By contrast, "power evangelism" is dependent upon the moment-by-moment leading of the Holy Spirit and by his revelation of what is going on in other persons' lives. "In power evangelism key obstacles—an adulterous affair, bitterness, a physical ailment, demon possession—are exposed and overcome, striking deeply into the hearts of people. This frees new believers from major obstacles so that they may experience future spiritual growth. Further, power encounters authenticate conversion experiences in a way that mere intellectual assents do not. This gives new Christians confidence about their conversions, a solid foundation for the rest of their lives."

In short, the best and most effective evangelism, strong and rapid growth in the Christian life, and lasting assurance of salvation are attained only by miracles.

This is a long way from what Christians used to believe when they sang, "My hope is built on nothing less / Than Jesus' blood and righteousness" or "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, / Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!" It is a long way from Romans 10.

John Wimber: An Evaluation

I think this movement is mistaken and dangerous, as anyone can tell from what I have said so far. But before pressing my critique, I want to acknowledge that there are nevertheless points in Wimber's teaching with which all true Christians should agree.

First, we can agree that spiritual warfare is a reality, and a serious matter at that. We cannot forget that Ephesians 6 (and comparable passages) are in the Bible, nor that we are often warned against Satan. However, we will also remember that Ephesians 6 does not promote miracle working as the way to do battle against Satan, but instead admonishes us to be clothed with the armor of Christian character and armed with the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (v. 17).

Second, we can acknowledge that much traditional Christianity *is* weak, including its evangelism. It often *is* a religion of the intellect only, not a religion of the heart. It *is* frequently formal and even dull. In large sections of the church, very little evangelism takes place.

Third, we can be open to the claim that God can (and does) do miracles. In the last study I acknowledged that there is a difference of opinion on this point. The best and best-known denial of the view that miracles are for today is B. B. Warfield's classic study of the alleged miraculous events in church history titled *Counterfeit Miracles*. It is a devastating exposure of many bogus claims of miracles from the patristic age to the twentieth century. But although Warfield begins from the perspective that miracles were given by God to authenticate the office of the apostles and ceased with them and their immediate successors (those on whom they laid their hands and passed on their gift), this great Princeton theologian nevertheless believes, as do most Christians, that God answers prayer and sometimes heals and does other humanly inexplicable things in answer to it. "We believe in a wonder-working God; but not in a wonder-working church," says Warfield.

Don't you agree with that?

I believe that a Christian can pray for the sick, even, in some cases, praying for the casting out of demons. But this does not mean that we have to believe in the vast majority of alleged miracles or be blinded to the deception of many who pretend to do them. Above all, it does not mean that we should alter Bible-taught ways of doing evangelism by mistakenly claiming special revelations or wrongly aspiring to do miracles.

"Signs and Wonders" in the Bible

The only reliable basis on which to evaluate the views of John Wimber, or anyone else for that matter, is the Bible's teaching, and in this case what we have to ask is: "What does the Bible itself say about 'signs and wonders'?" A "sign," of course, is an event that points to something greater than itself, and a "wonder" is an event that causes wonder or evokes amazement on the part of those who see it. Together, the terms refer to unusual events we might call "significant wonders."

In 1987 John Wimber paid a much-publicized visit to Australia, in response to which pastors in the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (the EFAC of Sydney) prepared a helpful study of Wimber's teaching, which they distributed to their parishes by way of pastoral guidance. The book was titled *Signs & Wonders and Evangelicals: A Response to the Teaching of John Wimber,* and it was written by professors Paul Barnett, Robert Doyle, and John Woodhouse and by the Bishop of South Sydney, John Reid. One chapter by John Woodhouse surveys the various ways "signs and wonders" are referred to in the Bible. He observes correctly that the phrase is used in four areas.

1. *Signs accompanying the historical redemptive acts of God.* This is the most common use of the term "signs and wonders," and it is localized at two points of the biblical revelation: the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt and the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ.

In the first category are such texts as Exodus 7:3-4 ("I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you..."), Deuteronomy 26:8 ("The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders"), and Acts 7:36 ("He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert"). There are also texts saying that God will unleash the same judgment signs against Israel if the people depart from God and do not repent of their sin (cf. Deut. 28:45-46). In the second category are such

texts as Acts 2:19, which quotes Joel 2:30 ("I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below..."), and Acts 2:22 ("Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him...").

This comparison suggests that the signs accompanying the redemptive work of Jesus parallel the signs accompanying the redemption of Israel from Egypt. But here is the important thing: Neither the Old Testament signs nor the New Testament signs are put forward as examples of corresponding contemporary miracles but as redemptive events that it is the work of faith to remember.

John Woodhouse writes correctly, "Faith involves remembering the signs and wonders by which God redeemed his people.... Unbelief is precisely a failure to remember those wonders.... A consequence of this is the fact that a desire for further signs and wonders is sinful and unbelieving."

This is exactly what Jesus said to the Pharisees. "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt. 12:39).

We might also note that signs do not in themselves create faith in the hearts of observers and can even harden hearts, as was the case with Pharaoh. In other words, even such spectacular signs as the plagues against Egypt and the miracles of Christ do not in themselves promote faith. Why? Woodhouse answers, "Because the power of God which saves sinners is *not seen* in any contemporary miracle, but only in the death of Christ on the cross."

That is why Paul told the Corinthians, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22-24).

2. *Deceptive signs and wonders.* John Wimber does not talk about this second class of miracles, but it, too, is a prominent strain in the Bible.

For example, in Deuteronomy the people are warned against prophets who do signs and wonders yet proclaim other gods. "You must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 13:3). In the same way, Jesus warned against "false Christs and false prophets [who] will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible" (Matt. 24:24). In Revelation 13 we have a culmination of these utterly deceptive miracles in "the beast" who serves Satan and Antichrist.

I am not suggesting, by reviewing this evidence, that John Wimber and his followers do miracles by the power of Satan. I am far more inclined to think that they are not real miracles but only self-induced "mind cures." But that is not my point. My point is that miracles alone prove nothing. They may be false and deceptive as well as true and instructive, and we are never told that they are God's means for converting unbelievers.

3. "*Signs*" *done by God's prophets.* There are a few scattered "signs" done by God's prophets, but these are not usually what we would call miracles. They are usually only symbolic or significant things or actions (cf. Isa. 8:18; 20:3; Ezek. 12:1-11; 24:15-27).

4. *The signs of the apostles.* The final category of biblical signs are those miracles done by the apostles, the effect of which was to authenticate their unique office and ministry. They are referred to in such texts as Acts 2:43 ("Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles"), Acts 5:12 ("The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people..."), and 2 Corinthians 12:12 ("The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance").

These, of course, are the miracles that mean so much to the Vineyard congregations. But in their rush to take them over into the present time and perpetuate them, the pastors of the movement make a fundamental error of interpretation. One great principle of hermeneutics (the science

of Bible interpretation) is that narrative events are to be interpreted by didactic or teaching events, rather than the other way around. In other words, that something has happened once or even more than once does not mean that it is to be taken as normative for us. What is normative is to be determined by the New Testament's explicit teaching, and, as we have seen, the New Testament does not teach that evangelism is to be done by cultivating miracles.

The bottom line of this investigation is that "signs and wonders" are not to be sought for today and that it is a mistake to understand such phenomena, whether truly miraculous or not, as biblical "signs."

Weakness Rather Than Power

I come now to the last of the arguments I want to develop in this study, which is that the "signs and wonders" movement is not only wrong, according to the Bible's teaching, which any movement that departs from strict biblical teaching must necessarily be, but also that it is harmful. There can be errors that are not harmful—we probably make them all the time—but this is not one of them. How is it harmful?

First, it cheapens the miraculous. Let me explain by speaking of my own convictions. I believe in miracles. I cannot say that I have ever seen anything I would accurately call a miracle, but I do believe in them. I do not stand with those who say that God does not (still less, cannot) work in miraculous ways today. I believe that God answers prayer in healing the sick. I believe that there are such things as demon possession and exorcisms, particularly in extremely pagan areas of the world, like those targeted by pioneer missionaries.

But if I believed that casting out demons (with healings) was the way to do evangelism, which I do not, what would I do? Well, either I would go around looking for a lot of demons to cast out, or I would begin to interpret demonism as including a lot of other things that I have already encountered.

It is this second approach that describes what Wimber does. It is true that he writes about what seems to be genuine demon possession—people who are taken over by other personalities, speak in other voices, fall down and thrash about, and spew out obscenities and hatred, particularly against Jesus Christ. But these accounts quickly slide over into descriptions of demonization and exorcism of a very different order, descriptions involving demons of bondage, temptation, fear, pain, and even physical ailments like itching. In fact, Wimber explains how he prefers the word "demonized" rather than "demon possession" for the purpose of including these phenomena.

In my opinion, this trivializes Satan and cheapens exorcism. It cheapens what is truly miraculous.

Second, the "signs and wonders" movement cheapens the gospel. It cheapens it by reducing the gospel to shrinking people's goiters, straightening backs, lengthening legs, and other such things, all of which are described in *Power Healing.* In fact, one of the striking things about Wimber's books, especially *Power Evangelism,* is that the message of the gospel is virtually unmentioned. There is much about miracles, but we are never told what Jesus accomplished on the cross or by his resurrection.

Indeed, if we are to take Wimber's illustrative material literally, it would seem that it is possible to become converted without hearing the gospel at all. He writes at one point, "One day a group of our young people approached a stranger in a parking lot. Soon they were praying over him, and he fell to the ground. By the time he got up, *the stranger was converted.* He is now a member of our church (emphasis added)."

Third, the "signs and wonders" movement cheapens suffering. Suffering has various causes, some arising within ourselves. But there is suffering that is given to Christians by God that is intended for their growth and God's glory. Such were the trials of Job, the suffering of the man who had been born blind, the thorn in the flesh endured by the apostle Paul, and the hurts, disappointments, and physical anguish endured by countless numbers of God's people today. The religion of signs reduces

all these to unnecessary affliction and further burdens us with lacking faith if the demon of suffering cannot be quickly cast out. That is a cruel gospel to impose on God's people. It is, writes Woodhouse, "a version of Christianity in which the gospel is not sufficiently powerful to produce mature Christian faith, the Scriptures are not sufficiently revealing for the life of faithful obedience to God, the finished work of Christ is not sufficiently relevant for effective evangelism, and the hope of Christ's coming is not sufficiently comforting for those who are suffering."

There is a better, *biblical* way to do evangelism. It is indicated in Revelation, where we are told that the saints overcame Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11).

Chapter 144.
Christian Preaching

Romans 10:8-9

In Luke 16:19-31 there is a story that would have been a good addition to the previous study, but which I have held for this one, because it is both a summary of what I wrote about earlier as well as an introduction to the themes I want to develop now.

Jesus was speaking about a rich man, who ate well every day, and a poor beggar named Lazarus. Both men died. Lazarus was carried into the presence of Abraham in paradise, and the rich man went to hell. At first the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to provide him with some comfort. But when that was declared to be impossible, he asked that Lazarus be sent back to earth to warn his five brothers of their impending judgment, since they were as wicked as himself: "I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Abraham answered, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

The rich man persisted, "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

Abraham's final word and the climactic point of the parable was this: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (v. 31).

This is exactly what Paul has been saying in Romans, of course. And it is exactly what Moses was saying before him in the verses from Deuteronomy 30 that Paul is quoting. The people did have "Moses and the Prophets." That is the word that, according to Moses, was "near" them, in their mouths and hearts (Deut. 30:14). That was sufficient for them. If they did not heed that written word and repent of their sin and turn to God in faith on the basis of that revelation, they would not be changed, even by a religion of miracles. No number of "signs and wonders," however great, would save them.

Today, says Paul, in exactly the same way, people have the Christian gospel, which is "the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Because the gospel is here today and because it is being proclaimed, all possible excuses for failing to believe in Christ and be saved from the coming judgment are cut off.

This text leads us into the heart of the content of the gospel and thus of all true Christian proclamation.

The Text Itself

However, at first glance there seems to be a minor problem with the text: the order of the two main items seems to be wrong. The first matter mentioned is mouth confession, followed by heart belief. But, we might ask, isn't it the case that we first believe with our hearts and then, second, confess Jesus Christ as Lord? This can be explained in a number of ways.

One explanation might be that Paul begins with what can be observed, that is, a person's public confession of Christ, then moves backward to the cause behind it, namely, his belief. Another explanation is that Paul deals first with the content of faith, as expressed by the mouth, then with the assent to it by the heart. However, in my judgment, the best explanation is that Paul is simply following the order found in the text from Deuteronomy, which he is quoting. Deuteronomy says, "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (Deut. 30:14). Paul repeats that order accurately, adding specific Christian content for each part.

We cannot make too much of the order, of course, because the apostle turns it around again in verse 10, giving what we think of as the correct sequence: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

Yet this leads to an important observation, namely, that Paul is not providing an ordered listing of steps to salvation or contrasting some items of belief that are internal with other items of belief that are external. Those kinds of distinctions are misleading at this point. Rather, taken together, the verses indicate that the items Paul is speaking of are actually all of one package. The confession that "Jesus is Lord" and the belief that God raised him from the dead are both parts of faith's content. That is, they are equally parts of the gospel. They are both truths that we are to believe and then, second, confess to other people.

In other words, preaching should contain both truths, and a Christian is to be defined as one who both believes them and confesses them openly.

"Jesus Is Lord"

The first truth is that "Jesus is Lord." What a tremendous statement! It is impossible to overestimate the significance of these three words (only two in Greek), for this was not only the first essential element of the gospel proclamation as well as of the first Christian confession. It was

also a confession of their faith for which believers of the first Christian centuries were willing to die.

How can those three words be that important? The answer, as we know, is that they are literally crammed with meaning. They testify to: (1) the person of Christ, (2) the unique work of Christ, and (3) the ongoing all-embracing rule of Christ over his people and church.

1. *The person of Christ.* The first of these implications is due to the fact that in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which was well known to the Jewish community of the first century and from which most of the New Testament writers quoted when citing Scripture, the word *kyrios* ("Lord") is used to translate the great Hebrew name for God: Yahweh, or Jehovah. It is used this way over 6,000 times. This is why most of our English Bibles do not use the name *Yahweh* but have the word *LORD* instead. The disciples of Christ knew that this word was repeatedly used to translate this great name for God. Yet, knowing this, they did not hesitate to transfer the title to Jesus, thereby indicating that in their view Jesus is Jehovah.

This is the meaning of *kyrios* in the great Christological passages of the New Testament. Here are some examples:

1 Corinthians 8:4-6. "...We know that an idol is nothing in all the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live."

Luke 2:11. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord," that is, Jehovah.

Psalm 110:1. Applied to himself by Jesus in Matthew 22:41-46. "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet'" (v. 44). Peter had this text in mind when he told the Sanhedrin, "God exalted him [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince

and Savior..." (Acts 5:31). *Philippians 2:5-11.* "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!
> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,
> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As far as Romans itself goes, a study of "Lord" shows that Paul uses it forty-four times in this book. In thirty cases it is used of Jesus Christ. In eight cases it is used of God the Father. In the remaining cases it could refer either to the Father or to Jesus referred to as God. In other words, the term is used interchangeably for both Jesus and the Father and is a clear evidence of Paul's belief in Jesus' complete deity.

This first meaning of the title shows why the early Christians would not apply the term "Lord" to any other. They understood that if they had done so, they would have repudiated Christ.

2. *The work of Christ.* The second implication of the tide "Lord" is that Jesus is the Savior. This is linked to his lordship, because, as John R. W. Stott writes, "The title 'Lord' is a symbol of Christ's victory over the forces of evil. If Jesus has been exalted over all the principalities and powers of evil, as indeed he has, this is the reason why he has been called Lord. If Jesus has been proclaimed Lord, as he has, it is because these powers are under his feet. He has conquered them on the cross, and therefore our salvation—that is to say, our rescue from sin, Satan, fear and death—is due to that victory."

3. *The rule of Christ over his people and church.* The third important implication of the words

"Jesus is Lord" is that Jesus rules over his people and church, which he must do if he truly is "the Lord." Does he? That is a personal question. In what areas does Jesus exercise this rule? That is a practical one. In the excellent study of Christ's lordship by John Stott from which I quoted earlier, six areas of Jesus' rule are suggested.

Our minds. If Jesus is our Lord, then one thing he must be Lord of is our thinking. He must be Lord of our minds. On one occasion, when the Lord called disciples, he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me..." (Matt. 11:29), meaning that he was to be the disciples' teacher. He is to be our teacher today through the Scriptures, which he caused to be inspired. That is why we must be men and women of the Book, students of the Word, if we really are Christ's followers.

Our ethics. In the study I referred to earlier, Stott points out that Jesus is not just Lord of our minds. He is Lord of our wills and of our moral standards also. "It is not only what we believe that is to come under the lordship of Jesus but also how we behave. Discipleship implies obedience, and obedience implies that there are absolute moral commands that we are required to obey. To refer to Jesus politely as 'our Lord' is not enough. He still says to us, 'Why do you call me Lord and do not the things that I say?'"

Our careers. If Jesus is Lord, then he is not only Lord of our minds, wills, and morals. He is

Lord of our time, and this means that he is Lord of our professions, jobs, careers, and ambitions. We cannot plan our lives as if our relationship to Jesus is somehow detached from those plans and irrelevant to them. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, one of our very first questions to Jesus must be, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

Our churches. Jesus is also head of the church. This truth delivers us from two banes. One is disorder. It occurs when those who are members of the church pursue their own courses— including what they wish their church to be—without regard to the guidelines for church life laid down

in the Bible or without proper consideration for those who are their brothers and sisters in the Lord. The second is clericalism. It occurs when laypeople abandon their God-given responsibilities in the church or when pastors tyrannize the church without acknowledging that they are servants of the people as well as servants of Christ and that they are called to serve the church as Jesus served it.

Our relation to the world. Jesus is not only our own personal Lord and not only Lord of the church, which he founded. He is also Lord of all life, the life of nations included. That is, he is the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16). We who are Christians stand as his representatives in the midst of history and cultures to call this world to account. We are here to remind the world that this same Jesus Christ whom we serve has spoken from heaven to reveal what true righteousness is, both for individuals and nations, and that those who disregard him do so at their peril. They will have to give an accounting before him at the final judgment.

Missions. A final implication flows from the Great Commission by which, on the basis of his own authority, the Lord sent disciples into the world to make disciples everywhere (Matt. 28:1820). The lordship of Jesus is the most powerful of missionary incentives. It is as Lord of our lives that Jesus tells us to go into the world, and because we acknowledge him as Lord, this is exactly what we do. The Duke of Wellington called the Great Commission Christ's "marching orders" for the church. Because we love him we want everyone to become his disciples.

As soon as we explore these implications of the confession "Jesus is Lord" we see why it was so important to the early Christians and why so many were willing to die rather than renounce it.

A Risen and Living Savior

The second proposition in the summary of the gospel and the confession of faith provided by our text is that "God raised him [that is, Jesus] from the dead." This statement has two great implications.

1. *The resurrection is proof of Christ's claims.* The resurrection proves a great many things. It proves: that there is a God and that the God of the Bible is the true God; that Jesus was a teacher sent from God and that Jesus was inerrant in his teachings and spoke the very words of God; that Jesus is the Son of God; that there is a day of judgment coming; that every believer in Christ is justified from all sin; that all who are united to Christ by faith will live again; and that Christians can have victory over sin.

But chiefly the resurrection proves that every believer in Christ is justified from sin, as Romans 4:25 flatly declares: "He [that is, Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." The resurrection is God's proof that the penalty for our transgressions has been fully paid by Jesus.

When Jesus was on earth, he said that he would die for the sins of others. The time for the crucifixion came, and he did die. But the question remained: Was his death fully adequate for others' sins? Did God accept his atonement? We know that if Jesus had sinned, however slightly, his death could not atone even for his own sin, let alone the sin of others. For three days the question remained unanswered. The body of Jesus lay in the cold Judean tomb. Then the long anticipated hour came. The breath of God swept through the sepulcher, and Jesus rose to appear to his followers and later to ascend to the right hand of the Father. By this means God declared to the entire universe, "I have accepted the atonement Jesus made." Reuben A. Torrey writes:

When Jesus died, he died as my representative, and I died in him; when he arose, he rose as my representative, and I arose in him.... I look at the cross of Christ, and I know that atonement has been made for my sins; I look at the open sepulcher and the risen and ascended Lord, and I know that the atonement has been accepted. There no longer remains a single sin on me, no matter how many or how great my sins may have been. My sins may have been as high as the mountains, but in the light of the resurrection the atonement that covers them is as high as heaven. My

sins may have been as deep as the ocean, but in the light of the resurrection the atonement that swallows them up is as deep as eternity.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The resurrection is the proclamation of the fact that God is fully and completely satisfied with the work that his Son did upon the Cross."

2. *The resurrection shows we do not serve a dead but rather a living Savior.* Leon Morris writes, "It is at the cross that God did his saving work, but Paul does not believe in a dead martyr but in a living Savior. Not only did Jesus die for our sins but God raised him, triumphant over all the forces of evil. If Christ is not raised, Paul holds, our faith is futile and we are yet in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17)." Jesus was raised and now lives to lead, bless, strengthen, and eventually reward those who love and serve him.

"My King Who Saved Me"

The very last part of Paul's summary of the Christian proclamation is that if we believe these things and confess Jesus as Lord before other people, we will "be saved." That is, we will be saved from the wrath of God about which so much of the Book of Romans has been speaking. That is why the word *saved* is in the future tense. We have been saved. We are being saved. But in this verse Paul teaches that we will also *be saved* from wrath if our faith is truly in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

What is more, we will stand firm in that confession to the very end, if we are genuinely converted. This is what the aged Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, did. He stood firm in his confession even when his life was on the line. He was martyred on February 22, A.D. 156. As Polycarp was being driven to the arena two of the city officials, who had respect for him because of his age and reputation, tried to persuade him to comply with the demand to honor Caesar. "What harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and burning incense... and saving yourself?" they asked.

Polycarp refused.

Later, in the arena, he explained his position, saying, "For eighty-six years I have been [Christ's] slave, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" Polycarp refused to call Caesar "Lord," because "Lord" meant "God" and there can only be one God. If Polycarp had called Caesar "Lord," then Jesus could not have been "Lord" for Polycarp, and Polycarp could not have been a Christian.

Those who recorded Polycarp's story shared his convictions, for they concluded by saying: "He [Polycarp] was arrested by Herod, when Philip of Tralles was high priest, and Statius Quadratus was governor, *but our Lord Jesus Christ was reigning forever.* To him be glory, honor, majesty and eternal dominion from generation to generation. Amen."

Polycarp had heard genuine Christian preaching, had believed the gospel as it had been faithfully proclaimed, had lived for Jesus Christ for eighty-six years, and he eventually accepted martyrdom rather than retract his confession. He is an example of how one becomes and remains a genuine Christian.

Chapter 145.
Lordship Salvation

Romans 10:9

In the last study I tried to spell out the content of Christian preaching as it is summarized in
Romans 10:9. In particular, I tried to show the full meaning of the words that were the first great Christian confession: "Jesus is Lord." I pointed out that those three words, simple as they seem, are actually overflowing with meaning, for they affirm: (1) that Jesus is fully divine, (2) that he is the Savior, and (3) that he rules over his people and church. I elaborated that last point by showing that if we are Christians, Jesus must be Lord of our minds, morals, careers, churches, relation to the secular world without, and missionary outreach.

But there is a segment of the evangelical church that disagrees with all that. It restricts the confession "Jesus is Lord" to the belief that Jesus is a divine Savior and explicitly eliminates any idea that Jesus must be Lord of our lives for us to be Christians.

Even more. It teaches that a person can be a Christian without being a follower of Jesus Christ. It reduces the gospel to the mere fact of Christ's having died for sinners, requires of sinners only that they acknowledge this by the barest intellectual assent, quite apart from any repentance or turning from sin, and then assures them of their eternal security when they may very well not be born again. This view bends faith beyond recognition and promises a false peace to thousands who have given verbal assent to this reductionist Christianity, but who are not in God's family.

Those who take this position call what I have explained as the gospel in the last study "Lordship salvation," and they dismiss it as heresy.

An Old Error in New Wineskins

Few theological positions, orthodox or not, are without precedent. And in this case, the view I am talking about is that of the eighteenth-century Scottish eccentric Robert Sandeman, who taught that everyone who is persuaded that Jesus actually died for sin as testified by the apostles is justified, regardless of any change in his or her life. The view is known by his name, Sandemanianism. However, this old error has appeared in new form in our day, largely through the influence of professors at Dallas Theological Seminary. I do not know anything to call it except "the Dallas doctrine."

The contemporary roots of this teaching lie in the works of Lewis Sperry Chafer, one of the founders of that seminary, who believed that Scripture speaks of two classes of Christians: those that are carnal and those that are spiritual. He wrote, "'The 'carnal' Christian is... characterized by a 'walk' that is on the same plane as that of the 'natural man.'"

The idea was a novel one when Chafer first expounded it, but it is well known and widely accepted today. It has even been added to and embellished. If a Christian can behave exactly like a natural or unsaved man, then what is it that makes him a Christian? The answer is "simple assent to the fact that Jesus died to be his or her Savior." Nothing else is necessary—in particular: no repentance, no discipleship, no change of behavior, not even any true perseverance in faith. In fact, to insist on any of these additional things is to propound a false gospel. Chafer did not say all this, of course, but since it is a logical extension of the idea of the carnal Christian, his followers eventually did.

One who has done so is Charles Caldwell Ryrie, editor of the popular Ryrie Study Bible. The most extreme proponent of this view is professor Zane C. Hodges, who has defended it in three works titled *The Gospel Under Siege, Dead Faith: What Is It*?, and *Absolutely Free!*

What has made this a major issue today is that the Dallas view has been challenged by pastor John MacArthur in a book called *The Gospel According to Jesus*, to which J. I. Packer and myself provided forewords. It is an attempt by a reformed dispensationalist to turn his fellow dispensationalists from their error.

I want to show why the Dallas doctrine is mistaken at this important point, just as I tried to show the error of the "signs and wonders" approach to evangelism. But, as with the "signs and wonders" movement, I want to state what can be said in favor of this view first.

The chief thing is that Charles Ryrie and Zane Hodges, and those who think as they do, want to preserve the purity of the gospel. That is to their credit. In my opinion, they are actually destroying the true gospel by what they teach, but that is not their intention. They are sons of the Reformation in this respect at least: they believe in justification by faith apart from works and want to guard that gospel from anything that might contaminate its purity. The reason they oppose a demand for repentance, discipleship, or a walk that gives evidence of an inward spiritual change is that they regard this demand as adding works to faith, and that, as we all know, is a false gospel. They want none of it.

Again, they want to affirm the doctrine of eternal security, since that, too, is a Reformation distinctive. They argue that if salvation depends in any way on repenting of sin, commitment, following Jesus as Lord, or a behavioral change, then assurance is destroyed, because we all sin. In fact, one of the reasons the Dallas doctrine eliminates obedience from the essence of saving faith is to include as Christians professing believers whose lives are filled with sin. "If only committed people are saved people," writes Charles Ryrie, "then where is there room for carnal Christians?"

Where indeed?

Clearly there is an error at this point. But seeing the error does not mean that we should miss the rightful concern these men have to uphold and teach the doctrines of grace and eternal security.

Must Jesus Be Lord to Be Savior?

One very lucid statement of the non-lordship position is by Charles Ryrie in the chapter from *Balancing the Christian Life* to which I have already alluded and from which I quoted. Ryrie asks the question: "Must Christ be Lord to be Savior?" He answers negatively for the following three reasons.

1. *There are many examples of Christians who have not surrendered to Jesus Christ as Lord.*

Ryrie cites Peter, who rebuked Jesus on one occasion ("Surely not, Lord!" Acts 10:14); Barnabas and Paul, who quarreled over taking John Mark with them on a second missionary journey (Acts 15:39); and the Ephesian Christians, who did not destroy their magic scrolls and charms until sometime after they had believed on Christ (Acts 19:19). In my opinion, the case of the Ephesians proves the exact opposite of what Ryrie thinks it does. It proves that when the Ephesians believed on Christ, the inevitable outcome was the destruction of all rivals to his lordship. But that is not the main point.

The main answer to Ryrie's argument is that he is equating commitment with perfection, which is obviously wrong. Christians sin, but that does not mean that they are not committed to Christ. If they lie down in their sin and do nothing about it, they are indeed uncommitted. They are not Christians. But if they are Christians, the way they show it is by getting up out of the sin— "repenting" is the right word for what they must do —and beginning to follow Christ again.

I have said elsewhere in these studies that there is all the difference in the world between falling down on the path and getting up and going on, and not being on the path at all. It is only those who are on the path who are Christians.

2. "*Jesus is Lord*" *only means* "*Jesus is God.*" *Specifically, it does not mean "Jesus is my Master."*

In developing this point, Ryrie rightly states, as I did in the last chapter, that "Lord" means "God" in all the important Christological passages. I said that it is the word used to translate the great name for God, Jehovah, in the Greek Old Testament, so that its application to Jesus by the New Testament writers indicates their belief in Christ's full deity. But Ryrie goes on from that truth to argue wrongly that because "Lord" means "God" it cannot mean anything else. Amazingly, he fails to see that the reason the word *Lord,* which on the human level does mean "master," as he admits, is used of God is that God is the supreme Master over all other masters. It is a case similar to our use of the word *Sovereign* with a capital *S*. There are many sovereigns, but God can be called *the* Sovereign because he is sovereign over all others.

In his zeal to divest "Lord" of all meanings that do not suit his purpose, Ryrie even says, "If the gospel of the Lord Jesus includes lordship over my life, it might as well also include the necessity of believing he is my Creator, Judge, coming King, Example, Teacher, and so forth..." But, of course, that is exactly what it *does* include. What is the meaning of "Jesus is divine" if the statement does not mean that Jesus is the Creator, Judge, Example, Teacher, and other obvious functions of

divinity? What does the word *God* mean if it does not include these matters?

When you begin to strip away the implications of this word, instead of adding to them and developing them, even the minimum amount you want to affirm becomes meaningless.

3. *To add anything to faith, even commitment, is to turn the gospel of salvation by faith into a gospel of works, which is a false gospel.*

Ryrie says, "The message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel; therefore, one of them is a false gospel and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel (Gal. 1:6-9)." But this argument fudges on the definition of faith. If true faith includes commitment, as the greatest theologians of the church have always claimed it does, then to insist on commitment is not to add anything to faith but only to insist that faith be true faith. And that is an important point, because a false faith, an imitation faith, or a dead faith saves no one.

Four Costly Errors

It is evident from my response to Ryrie's arguments that I believe the Dallas doctrine goes astray in a number of critical areas. But my remarks have only begun to touch on them. There are four areas in which this faulty understanding of the gospel is mistaken.

1. *The meaning of faith.* This is the chief error, and I have already touched on it in my response to Ryrie's views. According to the Bible, a saving faith is a living faith that inevitably leads to right conduct. It involves substantial content, personal heart response, and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord. According to the Dallas doctrine, faith is mere intellectual assent to the barest truths of the gospel.

2. *The need for repentance.* The Dallas school speaks of the need for repentance, but because it does not want to acknowledge the corresponding need for behavioral change it redefines repentance

to mean only "a change of mind" concerning who Jesus Christ is, irrespective of any reference to sin. G. Michael Cocoris, a Dallas product, writes, "The Bible requires repentance for salvation, but repentance does not mean to turn from sin, nor a change in one's conduct. Those are the fruits of repentance. Biblical repentance is a change of mind or attitude concerning either

God, Christ, dead works or sin."

That is not what the Bible means by repentance. The Bible's use of this word always implies a change of life direction, specifically a turning from sin. It is the flip side of faith, its corresponding member. In conversion we turn from sin, which is repentance, on the one hand, and on the other, we turn to Jesus, which is faith.

3. *The demand for discipleship.* The Dallas doctrine divorces salvation from discipleship, thus preserving the school's doctrine of the "carnal Christian." But Jesus defined salvation as discipleship. That is, he did not call people to mere intellectual assent to who he was but rather to become his disciples. His call was, "Follow me."

Several years ago I wrote a book to explore the meaning of Christ's call to discipleship, and in it I examined the matter of cost. I found that Jesus always stressed the cost of coming to him. He never said anything to suggest even remotely that a person could come to him as Savior and remain unchanged. That insight changed me. I said in the book that if I had been asked earlier what minimum amount of doctrine a person needed to know in order to become a Christian or what minimum price he would have to pay to follow Jesus, I would probably have replied as many others still do, stressing very little demand. But now I say, "The minimum amount a person must believe to be a Christian is *everything,* and the minimum amount a person must give is *all.*

You cannot hold back even a fraction of a percentage of yourself. Every sin must be abandoned. Every false thought must be repudiated. You must be the Lord's entirely."

Students of the Bible can decide for themselves whether this or the minimal demands of the Dallas school come closest to Christ's definition of what it means to be a Christian.

4. *The place of regeneration.* The fourth costly error of the Dallas doctrine is its failure to see the unbreakable link between justification and regeneration. The exponents of the Dallas view speak as if the only thing involved in the salvation of a sinner is justification. But Jesus also said, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Clearly, there can be no justification without regeneration, just as there is no regeneration without justification. But regeneration means the creation of a new nature by God. Therefore, if one is justified, he is also regenerated; and if he is regenerated, he will have a new nature and will begin to act differently. Indeed, the first evidences of this new nature are the person's turning from sin in repentance and turning to Jesus Christ as Savior in faith.

That is why we say that if there is no evidence of the new life, there is no new life. And if there is no new life, the person is not a true Christian regardless of his or her profession.

Even Worse Errors Than These

I have been speaking of the errors that have been linked to the Dallas doctrine, but at this point I need to say something more. Sometimes an error is not very serious, because it does not touch on matters of great importance. Sometimes an error is serious, but the implications are not worked out and so it does little damage. This is not the case here. As the Dallas school has been challenged in this area, the opponents of "Lordship salvation" have dug in their heels and (in the person of Zane Hodges at least) have affirmed in their defense that: (1) a person can be saved and eternally secure even though he or she has a dying (or dead) faith, and (2) the person can be saved even if he or she apostatizes, denying Jesus.

The first of these terrible and nearly unbelievable assertions comes as a result of Zane Hodges's attempt to deal with James 2:14-16, which distinguishes between a saving faith and a dead one. In Hodges's handling of this text, the passage is said to have nothing to do with spiritual salvation in the life to come but only with how one can preserve one's life now, here on earth.

According to Hodges, without works faith will wither. In fact, it can even die. "A body dies when it loses the spirit which keeps it alive. In the same way, a person's faith dies when it loses the animating factor of good works." Does that mean that salvation can be lost, then? That we must abandon the doctrine of eternal security? Not at all, according to this writer. The very fact that faith can die means that it was alive once, and on the basis of that once-alive faith we can confidently say, "Once saved, always saved." Writes Hodges, "The dangers of a dying faith are real. But they do not include hell."

That is terrible teaching. But here is a second terrible assertion, based on Hodges's handling of
Hebrews 6:4-6. Hodges says that this is a description of real apostasy experienced by real
Christians. That is, it is possible for Christians to "fall away." But we do not need to worry, since
"we should not construe... 'falling away' here as though it meant the loss of eternal life."

The bottom line of this pernicious exegesis is that a person can profess to believe in Christ early in life, live without works and thus see his or her faith wither, and at last die, so that the person no longer professes even the meager intellectual assent possessed at the beginning, and then can even deny Jesus as the divine Savior—that is, be utterly indistinguishable from a pagan, not only in external appearance but in internal conviction as well—*and still be a Christian,* that is, be saved eternally.

It is inconceivable to me how anyone can seriously regard that as the Bible's teaching. Yet it is where the Dallas doctrine leads, even though

not all who oppose "Lordship salvation" follow it to Hodges's incredible extremes. That this is the end of the line should be ample warning to anyone that the teaching is unstable at the core.

Historic Christianity

At the end of his critique of these errors in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, John MacArthur has a substantial appendix in which he shows by many quotations from the preachers and theologians of the past that "Lordship salvation" has always been the teaching of the church. In that section he cites thirty-one writers and offers forty-one quotations.

I cannot reproduce them all here, of course. But here is an important one, a series of comments by W. H. Griffith Thomas, one of the founders of Dallas Seminary before its present doctrinal decline. He wrote, "Our relation to Christ is based on his death and resurrection, and this means his Lordship. Indeed, the Lordship of Christ over the lives of his people was the very purpose for which he died and rose again.... We have to acknowledge Christ as our Lord. Sin is rebellion, and it is only as we surrender to him as Lord that we receive pardon from him as our Savior." Here is another. A. W. Tozer wrote:

[Years ago] no one would ever dare to rise in a meeting and say, "I am a Christian" if he had not surrendered his whole being to God and had taken Jesus Christ as his Lord as well as his Savior and had brought himself under obedience to the will of the Lord. It was only then that he could say, "I am saved." Today we let them say they are saved no matter how imperfect and incomplete the transaction, with the proviso that the deeper Christian life can be tacked on at some time in the future. Can it be that we really think that we do not owe Jesus Christ our obedience?

This is bad teaching brethren.

Indeed it is! But unfortunately, it is all too common in our time.

Chapter 146.

Heart Belief and Mouth Confession

Romans 10:10

In the last few studies I have been dealing with the nature of Christian preaching and therefore with the nature of the Christian gospel, based on the second paragraph of Romans 10. I want to carry that study further in this chapter, focusing on an important question: Is there such a thing as secret discipleship?

The Dallas doctrine would answer "Yes" since, according to that mistaken view, it is possible to be a Christian without any outward evidence of justification or regeneration at all. If you do not even have to repent of sin to be a Christian, you certainly do not have to confess Christ openly. In fact, you can even deny him. You can turn your back on him altogether. In the previous study I tried to show why that view is wrong, fatally wrong, in fact. Now I want to show that it is not only necessary to repent of sin, trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and follow him in faithful discipleship throughout life, but that it is also necessary to confess him openly before other men and women.

That is the teaching of our text: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom. 10:10). I want to explore the exact meaning of that clear statement.

Secret Discipleship?

As I prepared this study I remembered doing a sermon on this subject sixteen years earlier in which I asked two questions: "Is it possible for a person to be a secret believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it possible to believe in Jesus with our whole hearts and not confess him openly?" was asking those questions because I had come to a passage in my study of the Gospel of John in which many of the Jewish leaders are said to have believed on Jesus even though "because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue" (John 12:42).

It was a puzzling text to me, because on the surface it seemed to say that silent belief is possible, while, at the same time, the language was such that I naturally wondered if the belief spoken of in the case of these religious leaders was genuine. After all, the passage goes on to say, "for they loved praise from men more than praise from God" (v. 43)—and that does not sound like genuine Christianity.

I finally concluded that, whatever the case may have been, these men were trying to do something that ultimately is impossible. For this reason: Either the secrecy kills the discipleship, or else the discipleship kills the secrecy. In the end, secret discipleship is a contradiction in terms, and this means that we must confess Jesus openly if we are to be (and remain) true Christians.

Today I am not so hesitant. And one of the reasons I am not so hesitant is our text, which indissolubly links heart belief and mouth confession. You will recall from our earlier studies that we are not to find some prescribed sequence of events in these verses, as if we first believe and then confess, or even some supposed ordering of priorities, as if one item were essential and the other good but not essential. That is not how Paul is speaking. He is describing what it means to be a Christian, and his point is that all must believe the truth about Jesus, receive it into the heart, and then confess him openly before others.

When Paul says we must believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths, he is saying that we must do both and that it is the presence of both together—faith leading to confession and confession proving the reality of faith—that leads to "righteousness" and "salvation."

This is the way all the major commentators handle Romans 10:10. Robert Haldane, the Scottish

Bible teacher responsible for the Swiss revival of the early nineteenth century (sometimes called Haldane's Revival), wrote, "Confession of Christ is as necessary as faith in him, but necessary for a different purpose. Faith is necessary to obtain the gift of righteousness. Confession is necessary to prove that this gift is received. If a man does not confess Christ at the hazard of life, character, property, liberty, and everything dear to him, he has not the faith of Christ."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of London who was responsible for a revival of a different sort only a generation later, said, "Faith and confession... are joined together; let not man put them asunder."

Leon Morris, a scholar of our own day, writes, "These are but two parts of the same saving experience."

What a great verse this is! It is a preacher's verse. Some verses are for scholars; they are to be probed, analyzed, and fathomed. Some are for devotional reading; our hearts are warmed by them. Others, like this one, are to be declared boldly and joyfully. This is averse that, together with the one before it, assures us that if we believe in our hearts that Jesus is the Son of God, that he is both Lord and Savior and that God has raised him from the dead, and that if we confess him as Lord before other people, we will be justified by God, being forgiven of all sin, and will be saved, not only now or in future days but at the final judgment.

There is no greater message in all the world than that message. There is nothing so important in life as to believe on and confess Jesus. There is no greater result than the salvation to be gained by receiving and acting upon that gospel.

Heart Belief

The verse is in two parts, of course, and the first of these two parts concerns faith. It is what Paul is talking about when he says, "It is with your heart that you *believe and* are justified."

At this point we do not need to take a great deal of time to speak about the object of faith, for this is what the passage and our study have been exploring all along. The object of faith is "Jesus as Lord." This means, Jesus as: (1) the divine Son of God, (2) the Savior who died to rescue us from sin, and (3) the Lord who rules over his people and church. Some have argued that a person does not have to believe on Jesus as his or her Lord to be a Christian, maintaining that we need only to believe on him as our Savior. But a Savior who is not also Lord is another Jesus, a counterfeit Jesus, and a counterfeit Jesus will save no one. It is only by believing on the *Lord* Jesus Christ that we are saved.

What is new about this section of the verse is the phrase "with your heart." It is striking because it deals with the nature of true faith or belief. Without these words we might suppose, as the Dallas doctrine teaches, that faith is a matter of the intellect only. But lest we make that mistake, Paul tells us by these words that faith is a matter of the whole being—intellect, will, and emotions—which is what the word *heart in* the Bible signifies. The faith that saves is a faith that takes all we are and commits it to all that Jesus Christ is.

Moreover, "with the heart" implies two other important truths.

1. *It implies sincerity.* In one of her books and in many of her public talks, Corrie ten Boom describes a time in which, years after her deliverance from the Nazi death camps, she was confronted by one of the brutal German guards who had been responsible for the death of her sister Betsie. The guard, who had become a Christian, came forward at one of her meetings and asked her for forgiveness. Corrie described what a struggle it was for her. But at last the Holy Spirit had his way, and she grasped the outstretched hand of her former persecutor, responding, "Yes, I do forgive you—with all my heart."

That is what belief "with the heart" is all about. It means "sincerely" or "wholeheartedly." It is the way the Bible uses the word when it commands us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

Here is what John Calvin said about believing with the heart. "Let us note that the seat of faith is not in the head but in the heart. I am not going to argue about the part of the body in which faith is located, but since the word heart generally means a serious and sincere affection, I maintain that faith is a firm and effectual confidence, and not just a bare idea." It is, in other words, *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*, as the theologians of the Reformation and later centuries frequently expressed it.

2. *It implies the Holy Spirit's work.* When we look at what the Bible says about the hearts of men and women, we see, on the one hand, that the heart is "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9) and that, on the other hand, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to renew or regenerate evil hearts ("I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them..." Ezek. 11:19; cf. 18:31; 36:26). Otherwise, we do not get a right spirit, nor do we come to believe on Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, "These people come near to me with their mouth / and honor me with their lips, / but their *hearts* are far from me" (Isa. 29:13, emphasis added). Yet God also spoke through Jeremiah:

> "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.
> "I will put my law in their minds and write it *on their hearts.*
> I will be their God, and they will be my people.
> No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'
> because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."
>
> Jeremiah 31:33-34, emphasis added

This began to be fulfilled at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit operated through the preaching of
Peter to bring three thousand people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. It is being fulfilled in our day whenever people hear the Word of

God, turn from sin, believe on Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, and confess him before others.

Mouth Confession

The second part of this verse is the part with which I actually began, asking, "Is it possible to be a secret believer?" It answers by telling us, "It is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." This second part goes with the first, so that (in one sense) it is as necessary to confess Christ as Lord and Savior as it is to believe on him.

We are to confess him with our mouths, of course, which means openly and audibly. But a simple public testimony in a meeting does not exhaust the ways we can confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

How can we confess him? Let me suggest the following eight ways.

1. *In public worship.* The first and most obvious way in which you can confess Jesus Christ is by assembling with other Christians in public worship. There have been times in history when this has been a mere form for many. It is probably a mere form for many, even today. Yet this is changing. As more and more people are neglecting church, preferring the idle pleasures of the world to the demands of public worship, the mere fact of your joining with other believers to worship God can be a useful and significant confession that you are indeed a Christian.

I am aware of this most Sunday mornings. I live only four blocks from Tenth Presbyterian Church, so I walk to church. As I do this Sunday by Sunday throughout the year, I am aware of those I pass on the streets on those mornings. There are always a number who have been to the convenience store to pick up the Sunday papers and are reading them as they shuffle along sleepily. I also pass joggers. They are working earnestly to preserve their bodies, which will perish anyway in time, while they are indifferent to the condition of their souls. Other people are just walking along, some perhaps returning from an all-night debauch or binge.

But while all this is going on, there is an entirely different group of people, a subculture that is collecting from around the Delaware Valley. These people are alert and expectant. They have their Bibles in hand, and their minds are already attuned to the God they are coming to worship. The mere fact that they are collecting to worship him sets them apart. They are rightly and joyfully confessing Christ by what they do on Sunday mornings.

2. *By the sacraments.* A second way in which we confess Christ openly is by our participation in the sacraments: baptism, the initiatory sacrament of the Christian faith; and the Lord's Supper, the repeatable sacrament. Both are for Christians only, and by both we proclaim before other people that Jesus Christ is our Lord.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon had a wonderful sermon on the second half of this text, the part speaking of confession with our mouths, in which he listed a number of these means of confessing Christ. He spoke of baptism, calling it the crossing of the Rubicon: "If Caesar crossed the Rubicon, there would never be peace between him and the senate again. He draws his sword, and he throws away his scabbard. Such is the act of baptism to the believer. It is the crossing of the Rubicon. It is as much as to say, 'I cannot come back again to you. I am dead to you. And to prove I am, I am absolutely buried to you. I have nothing more to do with the world. I am

Christ's and Christ's forever."

So also with the Lord's Supper. As you partake of it you say to the world, "I am not my own. I am Christ's. I am in fellowship with him. Therefore, I cannot indulge in the sins in which you indulge or live for the goals for which you surrender everything."

3. *Through association with God's people.* Not all our associations with other believers are formal, that is, in worship services and sacraments. We also associate with them informally, proving by our identification with these others, of whatever race, nationality, or status in life, that we belong to the same Lord and confess the same gospel. You can do that at work, in weekly Bible studies, or

just by your friendships. We remember that in his first letter, the apostle John made our love for other Christians one of the tests by which we can know whether or not we are a Christian (1 John 3:11-13). If this is a way we can know we are Christians and are following Christ, it is obviously also a way by which others can know we are Christians. The pagans said of the early Christians, "Behold, how they love one another."

4. *By how we conduct our business.* How you conduct your business or how you work in someone else's business also testifies to whether or not you belong to Jesus Christ. It is a rare business that is utterly upright and moral. Therefore, there will be many occasions when a person who belongs to Christ will have to stand up for him, saying, "I cannot do that, because I am a Christian." Although a stand like that may result in isolation, abuse, ridicule, or persecution, even loss of a job, it is necessary. A faith that is not supported by an upright moral life is not worth having.

5. *In reaching out to others.* A fifth way we confess Christ before others is by reaching out to them in evangelism. Spurgeon said, "I believe, my brethren, that a Christian man can hardly carry out his confession with his mouth, unless he goes a little out of his way at times to bear testimony." Do *you* do that? Do you do anything, even something quite little, merely to be able to speak to others about Jesus? If not, how can you consider yourself to be a Christian? If you are a Christian, Christ is your Lord, and it is he who said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

6. *In temptation.* There is never a better and more hopeful opportunity to confess Jesus as Lord than in a time of temptation. Remember Joseph. He was pursued by the wife of his Egyptian master, Potiphar. But he refused to sleep with her, proclaiming, "... How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). The temptation gave him an opportunity to state his true allegiance, and stating it undoubtedly also helped him to resist the sin. You would be wise to do the same.

7. *In severe trials.* The seventh circumstance in which you can confess Christ forcefully is in severe trials. Have you lost your job? Has your wife or husband left you? Have you discovered that you have a serious, perhaps fatal illness? This is your opportunity to show the world that you are not like those who have no knowledge of the true God or of his Son our Savior. It is a time you can say, "I am not afraid of what is coming, for I belong to Jesus Christ. He has shown his love by dying for me, and I know that he will not desert me. Even in the face of a loved one's death, says Paul, though we grieve we do not grieve "like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).

8. *In the hour of our deaths.* Finally, we sometimes also have the privilege of confessing Jesus as Lord in the hour of our deaths. This is not always possible, given the forms of medical treatment today. But it often is. Some of the greatest testimonies of believers to the grace and power of God have been given on their deathbeds.

When he was dying, William Carey, known as the father of modern missions and a great missionary to India, said to a friend, "When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey; speak about
Dr. Carey's Savior."

David Livingstone, the pioneer missionary to Africa, said, "Build me a hut to die in. I am going home."

John Bunyan, the Bedford tinker who left the world the immortal Christian classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*, said as he died, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves. I go to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will, no doubt, through the mediation of his blessed Son, receive me, though a sinner. We shall ere long meet to sing the new song, and remain everlastingly happy, world without end. Amen."

Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist, said, "I see the children's faces. Earth is receding. Heaven is opening. God is calling."

Righteousness and Salvation

Since the end result of heart belief and mouth confession, which we have been studying, is the righteousness and salvation about which the text speaks, and since these are the greatest blessings any human being can receive, let it be your deep desire to believe on Jesus as Savior and Lord wholeheartedly and let it be your earnest endeavor to confess him before others in every possible way. Let's be rid of all "secret discipleship," if such a thing even exists. We do not have long to live. Let us use our time well and wisely, above all by trusting wholly in Jesus Christ and by confessing him boldly with our mouths. Let us stand with him, bearing his reproach, knowing that if we do, one day we will be with him in glory and will reign with him forever.

Jesus himself said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32).

Chapter 147.
Health, Wealth, and What?

Romans 10:10

For the last few studies I have been following an alternating procedure in which I have first expounded a text from Romans and then dealt with wrong ways of understanding the gospel or doing evangelism that result from misusing or neglecting what the text teaches. Thus far I have dealt with two wrong approaches: (1) the religion of signs and wonders, and (2) the doctrine that eliminates claims of Christ to lordship from salvation matters.

In this study I want to tackle another serious aberration, namely, the gospel that is often proclaimed on television by the so-called television evangelists. This is sometimes called the "health, wealth, and happiness" gospel.

The reasons I am dealing with this aberration at this point is that it has bearing on the word *saved,* which we came to in the last two verses we were studying. Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth,

'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, *you will be saved*" (emphasis added). The next verse, Romans 10:10, says, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and *are saved*" (emphasis added). I said in the last study that the future tense of the verb in verse 9 indicates that this is speaking of salvation from the wrath of God against sin at the last judgment. If I had been dealing with this fully, I could have shown that "salvation" is an inclusive term for what the Bible offers. It includes: (1) salvation from the penalty of sin, a past tense; (2) salvation from the power of sin, a present tense; and (3) salvation from the presence of sin, a future tense. Each part has to do with sin.

Most Christians will think this is obvious. What person who claims to be a Christian could deny it? Yet this is precisely what is being lost or even denied by the many popular TV preachers. This is no small matter. The error concerns the very essence of Christianity, and it is unusually harmful if for no other reason than that television is so pervasive and influential. For millions of Americans, the "electronic church" is virtually all they know of Christianity.

The Gospel According to Television

Let me begin by setting some parameters and providing some focus. First, what I am going to say does not apply to all religious television. It does not apply to the broadcasts of the Billy Graham Association, for instance. Billy Graham is an exception in this, as in many other areas of his unique ministry. Joel Nederhood's "Faith 20" program is another exception. So also, though to a lesser degree, is James Kennedy's television program. People who know the television medium well will say rightly that these programs are "bad television." That is, they do not play to television's unique capacities for oversimplification, drama, and entertainment. But that is precisely why they are a *good* exception. I hope they will survive.

What I am referring to are the exceptionally popular (read "financially successful") programs, particularly those that promote what is generally

called "positive [or possibility] thinking" and "positive confessionism." These programs are associated with such names as Robert Schuller, Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, and Robert Tilton. Instead of a traditional gospel of salvation from sin, these TV evangelists preach a man-centered gospel that, in its mildest form, offers self-esteem without repentance and, in its most startling extension, proclaims the deification of man, with its inevitable blasphemous encroachments on God's prerogatives.

This TV gospel promotes self-esteem instead of sin, self-help instead of atonement and redemption, an entertainer instead of Christ, and a lust for power instead of true discipleship.

In 1990, a talented friend of mine named Michael Horton edited a book on the TV evangelists entitled *The Agony of Deceit.* He concluded, after a careful examination of the actual teachings of this influential group of communicators, "All of the televangelists censured in this book tend to trivialize the plan of salvation. There is rarely any serious attempt to explain to the masses such basic redemptive truths as the substitutionary atonement, propitiation, or sacrifice and satisfaction.... One thing the viewer comes away with is the sense that the purpose of evangelism is not to satisfy God and his purposes, but to satisfy the consumer with the product."

In the following analysis I am depending in large measure on the material assembled by Horton and his associates.

The Gospel of Self-Esteem

The least objectionable, but still harmful, form of the TV gospel is the message of "self-esteem" associated with the name of Robert Schuller, pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, not far from Disneyland. Schuller's weekly Sunday-morning services are broadcast on more than two hundred television stations worldwide, and he is watched by more than three million people. In an interview feature in late 1984, *Christianity Today* claimed that he is "reaching more non-Christians than any other religious leader in America."

Robert Schuller wants to be orthodox and claims to be. He believes in the inerrancy of the Bible and affirms the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds. He even claims to be a Calvinist, professing submission to the Westminster Standards and the Canons of the Synod of Dort, which is the official standard of his denomination. Nevertheless, Schuller's doctrine of sin is deficient, and as a result his doctrine of salvation has shifted away from the message of God's redeeming work in Christ to what is basically a philosophy of positive thinking, at least to the extent that his views are disclosed on television.

In 1982, Schuller wrote a book that was mailed free to every minister in America. It was titled *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation.* In this book Schuller took issue with the ways traditional preaching speaks of sin and proposed a gospel of enlightened "self-esteem" instead. Clearly, Schuller believes that if other ministers follow his approach, most of them will have the same or nearly the same (numerical) success he has had.

What did he say? Schuller wrote, "Reformation theology failed to make clear that the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem." "The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, 'I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst.'" "Once a person believes he is an 'unworthy sinner,' it is doubtful if he can really honestly accept the saving grace God offers in Jesus Christ." Writing along the same lines in a paragraph quoted by *Christianity Today* in 1984, Schuller said, "I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition."

To be fair to Schuller, he claims that his evangelistic strategy is to get non-Christians in the door, as it were, and then teach them the gospel later. But it is also fair to say that whatever is heard on Schuller's influential television program is not that gospel.

Besides, one cannot help but question whether the true gospel can ever be built on a false foundation. In a helpful analysis of Schuller, authors Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon write, "One thing is certain...: The Bible never urges self-acceptance, self-love, self-assertion, selfconfidence, self-esteem, self-forgiveness, nor any of the other selfisms that are so popular today.

The answer to depression is not to accept self, but to turn from self to Christ. A preoccupation with self is the very antithesis of what the Bible teaches. "

Health, Wealth, and Happiness

The second, and much more harmful brand of the TV gospel is the "health, wealth, and happiness" message of the positive confessionists, men like Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, and Robert Tilton. These preachers believe that "health, wealth, and happiness" are the birthright of every Christian and that the power to attain them lies within Christians themselves. They affirm the gospel. I know of none who would deny outright that Jesus died for sin and rose again from the dead. But this is not the gospel they preach. In fact, they seem almost intentionally to ignore it.

What these preachers really seem to believe in is the power of the mind to visualize and thus create what one desires. This is New Age thinking. It is not far removed from the fantasies of Shirley MacLaine and may actually have the same origins, as some argue.

A popular slogan for this distortion of the Bible's message is: "Name it and claim it." That is, we have the right to whatever we want because we are God's sons and daughters or even, as we will see, because we are ourselves "little gods." We see this view reflected in book and pamphlet titles such as Kenneth E. Hagin's "How to Write Your Own Ticket with God" and Robert Tilton's magazine, *Signs, Wonders and Miracles of Faith,* which is filled with stories of financial and physical success from his followers. Kenneth Copeland has written "God's Will Is Health" and "God's Will Is Prosperity." Oral Roberts promises people on his mailing list, "prosperity miracles that are within fingertip reach of your faith,"

and one of his most recent books is titled *How I Learned Jesus Was Not Poor*.

Christians who know their Bibles may wonder how the TV evangelists deal with Bible statements to the contrary, statements that say we are called to suffer with Christ or Job's statement that "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away" (Job 1:21). It is not often that we hear the TV evangelists contradict Scripture, but they do at this point. Charles Capps, another
"name it and claim it" preacher, said that Job "was sure not under the anointing" when he said, "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away" and called the statement a "lie."

Even Pat Robertson, president of the Christian Broadcasting Network and a former candidate for the presidency of the United States in the 1988 elections, said, "I can hardly think that the Bible, which was transmitted through human beings, is totally perfect. I believe it to be the Word of God and a fully inspired book, but not perfection."

The false teaching I have been describing would be serious enough if it stopped here. But, unfortunately, it does not. In an effort to enforce the "authority" the positive confessionists believe to have been given to each Christian, these teachers extend their errors to insist that by their rebirth, Christians have become "little gods" and therefore possess the authority of God himself, not only in "health, wealth, and happiness" matters but in all things. This is either so ignorant or so diabolical that it is hard for most Christians to believe that such "nice Christian men" are teaching this. But they are, as scores of verbatim quotations show. Here are some examples....

Kenneth Copeland, one of the most popular TV evangelists, said, "Every man who has been born again is an incarnation, and Christianity is a miracle. The believer is as much an incarnation as was Jesus of Nazareth." On another occasion he said, "You don't have a god in you. You are one."

Kenneth E. Hagin wrote, "Even many in the great body of Full Gospel people do not know that the new birth is a real incarnation; they do not

know that they are as much sons and daughters of
God as Jesus."

In a televised interview with Copeland, Trinity Broadcasting Network's Paul Crouch made this statement: "We are gods. I am a little god. I have his name. I am one with him.... Critics be gone!"

Here is a particularly offensive example from a tape series called "Believing in Yourself" by Casey Treat.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost had a conference and they said, "Let's make man an exact duplicate of us." Oh, I don't know about you, but that does turn my crank! An exact duplicate of God! Say it out loud —"I'm an exact duplicate of God!" [The audience repeats it a bit tentatively and uncertainly]

Come on, say it! [He leads them in unison.] "I'm an exact duplicate of God!" Say it again, "I'm an exact duplicate of God!" [The congregation is getting into it, louder and bolder, with more enthusiasm each time.] Say it like you mean it! [He's yelling now.] "I'm an exact duplicate of God!" Yell it out loud! Shout it! [They follow as he leads.] "I'm an exact duplicate of God!" "I'm an exact duplicate of God!" [Repeatedly]....

When God looks in the mirror, he sees me! When I look in the mirror, I see God! Oh, hallelujah!...

You know, sometimes people say to me, when they're mad and want to put me down.... "You just think you're a little god." Thank you! Hallelujah! You got that right! "Who d'you think you are, Jesus?" Yep!

Are you listening to me? Are you kids running around here acting like little gods? Why not? God told me to!... Since I'm an exact duplicate of God, I'm going to act like God!"

What we see in this teaching is an inevitable multiplication of false doctrines. It began with unlimited faith, but it soon progressed to unlimited health, unlimited wealth, unlimited power, and unlimited divinity. And even that is not the end. The last stage is unlimited

dominion, even more dominion or authority than Jesus. Kenneth Hagin tells of a supposed conversation he had with God that was periodically interrupted by Satan. Hagin asked God to silence the devil, but God said he couldn't do it. He was powerless. So Hagin commanded Satan to be quiet. Hagin concluded his story with these words: "Jesus looked at me and said, 'If you hadn't done anything about that, I couldn't have.'"

What is the end purpose of this unlimited, divine authority? I remind you that it is to grow healthy and rich, and to be happy for that reason. That is, it is selfish. Pat Robertson said, "We are to command the money to come to us." Fred Price says, "You, as a Christian, are supposed to be master of your circumstances.... There is no way in the world you can reign as a king and be poverty-stricken."

Let me say that I do not know of any teachings anywhere that are a better contemporary illustration of the warning of 2 Timothy 3:1-5, which says that in the last days, "people will be lovers of themselves [the gospel of 'self-esteem'], lovers of money [and]... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God [the 'health, wealth, and happiness' gospel]."

The Nature of Television

There is one more thing that needs to be said before I drop this topic and go on with our studies of Romans 10. The problems I have been describing result in large measure from the very nature of television, by which I mean that broadcast television is a bad medium for communicating the gospel.

We have been taught to think of television as a powerful educational tool, but education is what television probably does worst. Broadcast television is an entertainment medium, and the result is that it eventually turns everything it touches into entertainment. If entertainment is what it is presenting, that is all right. You may as well watch a movie on television as see it in a theater. But to the degree it tries to be serious, television is harmful, because it trivializes the serious by making news events, politics—yes, even religion itself—entertainment.

Because television creates and thrives on celebrities, when religion goes on television the evangelist inevitably becomes the focus of audience attention, a celebrity. He becomes "a god" and soon begins to think of himself as one, promising the viewers that they can become "gods," too. Again, the program becomes a performance, entertainment, because that is what television is. As a result, religious programs thrive, not by preaching of the gospel but by becoming "holy vaudeville" or talk shows. Above all, television is marketing products. So in the end the gospel (or religion) becomes merely another item to be sold, and success is viewed, not in the number of conversions, still less in the development of Christian character, but in audience share and income.

What I am saying is that television is not a good place to do religion. Those who attempt it do so at their own peril and that of their viewers.

We would be far better off heeding the words of Romans 10, which warn us against ascending into heaven to bring Christ down or descending into the deep to bring him up from the dead— can we say, "trying to be celebrities?"—and instead direct us to the Word of God, which is given to us by revelation, is near us, and is the "word of faith we are proclaiming" (vv. 6-8).

As far as I am concerned, let me say clearly that I have no new word from God, no new revelation. The only word I have is the Word that has been once for all delivered to God's saints. I am a teacher. I seek only to point you to those old doctrines and invite you to walk those worn paths. I do not want to entertain. The world will do that. I want to challenge your minds and move your hearts to obey the Bible's teachings. And God forbid that I, or any other preacher, should teach anything contrary to the true gospel doctrine of repentance for sin and corresponding faith in and submission to Jesus Christ. I echo Michael Horton's own words when he says:

The biblical gospel offers freedom from sin, not sinlessness; liberation from guilt, not from sinconsciousness; salvation from spiritual, not material, poverty. It offers peace with God won by Christ's bloody sacrifice—not success won by our incessant "decrees." It promises

salvation from God's wrath, not freedom from the unhappiness common to all humanity from time to time. And it hides us—in the midst of our pain and grief—in the wounds of Christ, who has made us worthy to share in his suffering.

Chapter 148.
Freed from Shame or Shameless?

Romans 10:11

Near the end of the second paragraph of Romans 10, there is a quotation from the Old Testament that Paul has already used once before, at the end of Romans 9. It is from Isaiah 28, and it says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame" (Rom. 10:11; cf. 9:23; Isa. 28:16).

This verse teaches two things: (1) the way of salvation is trust or belief in Jesus Christ, a point Paul has made many times earlier, and (2) this way is open to everyone, to the Gentile as well as to the Jew, a point which Paul is now going to stress. At the same time, the verse also paves the way for the invitation to everyone to believe, which is found in verses 12 and 13, and supports the challenge to ministers to preach the gospel to all the world's people, which is in verses 14 and 15.

Like verses 9 and 10 that precede it, this is a tremendous verse for preachers. It speaks of salvation, which is the essential task of preaching, calling on all people everywhere to put their trust in Christ. And it does so powerfully, making an implied contrast between those who do believe in Jesus and are saved, and those who do not and are lost. It is a verse from which preachers can bring out many various aspects of the gospel of God's grace.

Whatever Became of Shame?

The new idea in this verse is "shame." I have not discussed it before in this series, so I want to explore it now. But it is hard to talk about shame

today, for the reason that very few people in our day are ashamed of anything or even think in such terms.

On the contrary, ours is an exceedingly shameless age.

Nearly twenty years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger of the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin*? I thought of that book and its title as I began to work on this subject, because it struck me as I proceeded with my study that in our day "shame" is an even more elusive subject than "sin," and probably for connected reasons. Menninger argued that in recent years "sin" has first been reinterpreted as "crime," which means that it has lost its core definition as being chiefly a violation of the law of God and has become instead only a violation of human law. Then it was changed from being a "crime" into a "symptom," meaning that it is now seen as being no one's fault particularly. At this stage, anything bad that anyone does can be blamed either on one's genes or the environment.

And that is why the sense of shame has gone away, too. Shame implies guilt for wrongdoing. But if none of us ever does anything wrong, there is no need to feel guilty about anything; and if there is no need to feel guilty, there is no need to be ashamed. People have no sense of shame today. We are a shameless people.

I was surprised to discover this by what is *not* being written today, though I probably should not have been. Let me explain. As I began this study I turned to the many books on pop-psychology, counseling, and self-discovery that find their way to my bookshelves, thinking I would discover lots of interesting material about overcoming or dealing with shame in those books. But I did not. Hardly anything has been written about shame. I couldn't even find it in Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin?* Apparently, it is not in the category of what are popularly called "felt needs."

Next I looked in my books of anecdotes and quotations. But there were no stories or snappy sayings there.

In the end I turned to the massive *Oxford English Dictionary,* where I found pages of definitions of "shame," supported by scores of quotations from English writers. But here is the interesting thing. The quotations from which the editors of this great dictionary derived their definitions are numerous only from the early centuries of the English language. They become less frequent as the centuries go by and cease somewhere in the last century. Apparently, no one has felt much shame about anything since roughly 1896, the last date for which I could find a quotation.

"Shame" in the Bible

What a difference when we turn to the Bible! I have a computer program that will run through all the occurrences of a word or combination of words in the New International Version text, the one I use. When I ran a check on the words *shame* or *ashamed,* I found that these words occur 181 times: 149 times in the Old Testament and 32 times in the New Testament. So, obviously, shame is an important biblical idea.

What does shame mean?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines shame as a "painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonoring, ridiculous or indecorous in one's own conduct or circumstances... or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency." But the Bible carries the meaning further and deeper than that. The Bible definition contains several important elements.

1. *Disappointment.* The first element is best described by the words "acute disappointment," which means being let down by someone or something in which we have believed. Paul has already used the word this way at least twice earlier in Romans, in Romans 1:16 and 5:5. In Romans 1:16 he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." He does not mean merely that he is not embarrassed by the gospel, though that is also true, but that he is sure he will never be let down by it, since "it is the power of God for the salvation of

everyone who believes." Similarly, in Romans 5:5, where the NIV even translates the word "shame" as "disappointment," the apostle writes, "And hope does not disappoint us." It doesn't let us down.

Therefore, in terms of our text, we can say that "the one who trusts in Jesus Christ will never be disappointed by him," either in this life or the life to come. Jesus will always be found to have fulfilled his promises to us completely.

2. *Being confounded.* The second category of texts carries the idea of shame a bit further, envisioning a situation in which a person is confounded or left speechless. This is the way Job felt in his suffering. He said, "Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head, / for I am full of shame / and drowned in my affliction" (Job 10:15). Similarly, God says of those who have done evil, "... you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation" (Ezek. 16:63).

In my opinion, one of the most offensive things about sin is that it is never silent. Whatever the offense, the one who has committed it will find an excuse, blaming God or others or the environment or his or her genes. But this will cease in the day of God's judgment. In that day all sin and all the circumstances leading up to it will be laid bare, the shame of the wicked will be acute and profound, and they will be utterly speechless, silent, abashed, humiliated, and disgraced. No one whose sin is not covered by the blood of Jesus Christ will have a single thing to say.

3. *Exposure.* Perhaps the most important element in the biblical idea of shame is exposure, particularly exposure of our sins and sinful natures in God's presence. This idea is found in the earliest pages of the Bible in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve.

We are told in Genesis 2:25, which describes the condition of our first parents before the fall, that "the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." Rightly so, of course. They had nothing to be ashamed about. They had not sinned. So they stood naked before God

and felt no shame, and naked before each other and felt no shame. They had no shame in their own eyes either. But when they sinned, which is what Genesis 3 is about, they did feel shame and tried to hide their nakedness by making clothes of fig leaves. Later, when God came to them in the garden, they tried to hide from him by retreating into the shrubbery.

And how about the day of God's final judgment? Jesus said of the wicked in that day, "They will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" (Luke 23:30; cf. Hosea 10:8), so great will be their dread of this ultimate exposure.

4. *Disgrace.* The final element in the biblical idea of shame is disgrace or extreme humiliation. It is what Daniel was speaking of when he wrote of God's judgment, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). There are scores of similar texts.

No Shame Now, But Shame Hereafter

We come now to the main point of this study and our text, and it is that those who do not trust Christ, though they may be shameless now, will be overcome with shame in the day of God's judgment, while those who trust Christ here, though they may be made objects of great ridicule, scorn, and shame by unbelievers, will have no shame hereafter.

The first case is that of the unsaved. *The unsaved may have no sense of shame now, but they will have shame hereafter.*

The unsaved sometimes talk about Christians as if they have faith in faith while the worldly build on facts. But everyone has faith in something, even unbelievers. What do the unsaved have faith in? Well, many trust their good reputations. As long as people think well of them, they suppose they will always be able to get by. Some trust their achievements. Certainly they will count for something, they think.

Many more trust in their stocks, bonds, property, or bank accounts. Still others place faith in their family, friends, and acquaintances.

But these "good" things do not always last, even here. Reputations fail, achievements are overshadowed or forgotten, wealth is lost, and friends and acquaintances reject us.

And the situation is even worse when we think in terms of heaven. What is a human reputation to count for there? Nothing at all. In fact, it is worse than nothing. We are sinners, according to the Bible's teaching, and the only reputation we have in heaven is for having rejected God, broken his law, and scorned his warnings. Achievements? The only achievement God will recognize is perfection. Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).
None of us have done that. We are all condemned for our willful and sinful imperfections. Wealth? We know that wealth will not help us in God's day of judgment. We even say, "You can't take it with you." Besides, what could our wealth possibly mean to God, who has created and actually owns all things! If God should regard it at all, it would only be to censure us for coveting, hoarding, or misusing the wealth he has entrusted to us. Finally, even friends will fail us in that day, for at the judgment each will be concerned for his or her own standing before God and will not be thinking of us at all.

In an excellent sermon on this text, Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, "It will be a sorry business if we have been trusting in our good temper, our charity, our patriotism, our courage or our honesty, and when we come to die shall be made to feel that these cannot satisfy the claims of divine justice or give us a passport to the skies. How sad to see robes turn to rags, and comeliness into corruption!"

In that day the people who have had no shame here, who are like those described by the prophet Jeremiah—"they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush" (Jer. 6:15)—these shall be utterly confounded. They will find that the objects of their hopes are empty.

They will have nothing to say. Their shame will be exposed, and they will be disgraced in their own eyes and the eyes of others forever.

No Shame (Here or) Hereafter

The second case is that of Christians. *Those who trust Christ here, though they may be made objects of ridicule, scorn, and shame by unbelievers, will have no shame hereafter.*

If the object of their trust, Jesus Christ, were not who he is, I suppose they might know shame hereafter. If they should get to heaven and discover that Jesus is not the Savior they imagined him to be, they would certainly be confounded. If they should find that his death on the cross was not adequate punishment for their sins or that his power to keep them from falling in this life and even after this life was not sufficient, they might be ashamed. They might be ashamed that they confessed him openly before other men and women or that they induced others to turn from their sin and trust him.

They might be disappointed that they had placed him first in their lives, when there were so many other good things to be enjoyed. If Jesus should not be found to be altogether lovely, the treasure above all treasures, they could conclude that they made a bad bargain. They had only Jesus, but they could have had money and land and good times and the pleasures that sin provides.

But how could that be? Jesus is who the Bible declares him to be. He is the very Son of God, our Savior. He is the lily of the valley and the bright morning star. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Light of the World. He is the Bread of Heaven. He is the living water; anyone who drinks of him will never thirst again. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the Word of God. He is the Lamb of God. He is the faithful and true witness. He is Immanuel,

"God with us."

How can anyone be disappointed with Jesus? How can anyone be confounded or disgraced when his or her hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ alone?

But aren't Christians sinners, too? Yes, they are. But they are sinners whose sin has been forgiven and whose nakedness has been covered by the righteousness of Christ.

I go back to the story of Adam and Eve in Eden. Our first parents were made innocent but lost their innocence through their sin of eating the forbidden fruit. Before that, they were naked and felt no shame. Afterwards they knew shame and proved it by trying to hide their nakedness, even when God came to them in the garden. Although that is the place in the story at which we left off earlier, it is not the end of the story. God came to them in the garden to expose their sin and deal with it, for God cannot ignore sin and all sin must (and will) be exposed in his presence. But, having exposed the sin and judged it, God did not stop there. We are told that God killed animals and "made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21).

What a wonderful picture that is! There was no way Adam and Eve could go back to the innocence they had enjoyed before the fall. Lost innocence can never be restored. But, although they could never go back, they could go forward, and the way forward was through the clothes of skin that symbolized the righteousness of Jesus Christ, given to all who put their trust in him.

Shame? Yes. But shame recognized, confessed, and dealt with permanently in God's own way. Sin is real. So is the shame that should and eventually will accompany it. But the atonement is also real. Restitution has been made by Jesus. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in that great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully through thee absolved I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

Whoever You Are

I call your attention to one final point. I have pointed out that in Romans 10:11, Paul is quoting from Isaiah 28:16. But to be exact I need to note that at this point he introduces a slight change in the text, a change made readily evident by comparing his first citation of the text in Romans 9:33 and his second citation in Romans 10:11. The first is closer to the Hebrew (and Septuagint, which Paul is actually quoting) when it begins "the one who." Paul broadens the text in his second use of it by substituting "anyone" for the original rendering.

Why does he do this? Doesn't Paul have a proper respect for the biblical text? Doesn't he want to treat the Old Testament carefully?

It is not that at all. What Paul wants to do (and is doing) is to bring out the full meaning of the passage, showing that "the one who" means anybody, Gentiles as well as Jews, Americans as well as Europeans, rich people as well as poor people, the disadvantaged as well as the mighty, and so on. If you do not come to Christ, you will be confounded and ashamed in the day of God's judgment. But you may nevertheless come to Christ, whoever you may be.

Do not delude yourself into thinking that you can do nothing and that everything will nevertheless be all right for you. Apart from Christ you are in deadly peril. The day will come when the Judge of the earth will summon you to his high court, and you will be required to account for your life and explain your wrongdoing. What will you say in that day when the holy God confronts you? What possible excuses can you give? In Romans 3, Paul describes what will happen. He says that in that day "every mouth [will] be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:19).

I tell you as a minister of the Word of God that the day is coming when you will stand in God's court. You will stand there in either one of two ways. Either you will stand clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ as one for whom he died, whose sin and shame have been taken away. Or you will stand in the horror of your own spiritual and moral nakedness, in shame, and you will be condemned for your sin.

The Book of Revelation speaks of such people, echoing the words of Jesus himself, which I quoted earlier. "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" (Rev. 6:15-17).

But the rocks will not fall. The rocks obey their Master in heaven, and neither they nor anything else will intervene to cover the exposure of those who have rejected Christ and spurned the gospel of God's grace. Their shame and your shame will be profound if you are not in Jesus Christ.

Do not wait until the day of God's judgment overtakes you, when all acts of repentance and faith will be too late. Flee to Christ now! Trust him while there is still an opportunity to do so.

The Bible says that "now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

Chapter 149.
Salvation for All

Romans 10:12-13

One of the delightful things about studying the Bible is that just when we think we have mastered one of its great doctrines, another complementary doctrine comes along to challenge our still-limited understanding of Bible truth and stretch our vision.

We have a case in point in Romans 10. If you can remember back to the beginning of Romans 9, you will recall that this great middle section of the letter began with the doctrine of election. Paul was asking why it is that not all Jews are being saved and whether the fact that they are not means that God has broken his promises to them, promises recorded in the Old Testament. He answered by teaching the doctrine of election, saying that the promises of God are for God's elect people only and that not all Jews, any more than all Gentiles, are elect. He gave three Old Testament examples: Abraham, who was chosen out of a pagan background; Isaac, who was chosen as the son of the promise rather than his half brother, Ishmael; and Jacob, who was chosen by God rather than his twin brother, Esau.

Then, having made his point about election, the apostle went on to teach about divine reprobation, the doctrine that God deliberately passes by some, who are left to perish in their sins, while saving others. He illustrated this by the case of Pharaoh, concluding, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18; quoting Exod. 9:16).

Most people who first read about or hear of these two doctrines, election and reprobation, do not like them. They seem wrong, which is why Paul takes so much time to explain and defend them. His defense occupies most of the remainder of Romans 9. But here is the amazing thing. After having explained and defended these doctrines, as only Paul can do, and also presumably after having convinced us of their profound truth, the apostle now seems to be saying something utterly contradictory. He says that anyone who wishes can be saved.

At the end of Romans 9 he had quoted Isaiah 28:16, which says that "the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." So far so good! That form of the verse, the Old Testament form, is not the least bit

inconsistent with the doctrine of election, even in appearance. "The one" means "the elect one." But Paul is not content to leave the verse in that form. Instead of leaving it as it is, he alters the subject of the sentence by substituting the word "anyone" for "the one," thereby universalizing it. And lest we miss what he is doing, he makes his point twice, once by requoting Isaiah 28:16 in verse 11 and then by saying the same thing over again in a quotation from Joel 2:32 in verse 13.

We have already studied the first statement, the alteration of the Old Testament quotation in verse 11: "*Anyone* who trusts in him will never be put to shame." The second quotation says, "*Anyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v. 13).

What a stretching of our minds!

On the one hand, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18). That teaches the doctrines of election and reprobation.

But, on the other hand, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." That is the universal gospel offer.

A Welcome Doctrine

I do not mean to suggest by this introduction to Romans 10:12-13 that there can ever be a contradiction in the Bible, of course, for there cannot. The Bible is God's book, and God does not contradict himself, alter his truth, or lie. In this case, the explanation is that although everyone is free to come to Jesus Christ in salvation and may indeed come if he or she will, the only ones who *do* come are those whom God has chosen and regenerated, because it is only their rebirth that enables them to trust Christ.

But that is not the thrust of these verses. Verses 12 and 13 are not in Romans 10 to give us a theological explanation of election in reference to the parallel truth, which is the gospel offer. They are there to extend the gospel offer, which is clear from what follows, since in the very

next section Paul appeals for messengers to take the offer of salvation for all who will trust Jesus Christ as Savior throughout the world.

What a welcome teaching this is—"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." If it were not for this teaching, we might think that the doctrine of election necessarily excludes us or that the gospel is for people other than ourselves. But here we are told that it is for you and me, all of us, if we will trust Jesus. It does not make any difference who you are or what you may or may not have done. You may be rich or poor, educated or uneducated, advantaged or disadvantaged. You may be passive or highly motivated. You may be religious or not religious at all. You may be moral, or you may be very immoral. You may have lived in sin a long time. You may have committed adultery or stolen money. You may even have murdered someone. It does not matter. The text says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

"There Is No Difference"

But perhaps you are still thinking that there is some difference that might exclude you. If so, you need to see that any possible differences are excluded on two counts. Paul expresses them as two reasons why "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

1. *There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.* This means that there is no meaningful difference between any two peoples, of course. Because, if ever there could have been a difference, it would have been the difference between the Jewish people and all others. God had chosen the Jewish people to be a nation through which he would send the Messiah. And not only that, he had given them the law and made special promises to them. Paul knew these advantages and appreciated them, because he had listed them in the ninth chapter of Romans: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them

is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!" (Rom. 9:3-5).

If ever any people had the advantage of position and promise, it was the Jewish people. Yet "there is no difference between Jew and Gentile" so far as the gospel is concerned. Why? Because all are sinners—Paul has made this point in the first two and a half chapters of the letter—and because no sinner, however favored, is able to achieve a right relationship to God by his or her abilities. God has done this himself for sinners through the death of Jesus Christ, and this death is for all who will trust him. In other words, Jesus did not die only for Jews. He died for Gentiles, too. He died to save all who will call on him for salvation.

2. *The same Lord is Lord of all people.* If there were different gods, we might expect that the various peoples of the world who worship these different gods would be treated differently by them. But because there is only one God, it is reasonable to expect that in matters of salvation this one God will treat all his creatures on an equal basis. And he has. We might say that this statement, "the same Lord is Lord of all," is summarized by what Paul wrote to his young protege Timothy: "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

There is a disagreement among commentators whether "Lord" in this verse means Jesus or God the Father, since it could mean either. Charles Hodge presents both sides. The majority of commentators refer the word to Jesus because it is used of him in verse 9, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved," and because the word is so often used of Jesus in the New Testament. On the other hand, says Hodge, in the next verse "Lord" refers to the Father, since the verse is a quotation from Joel, who uses "Lord" that way. Again, the idea is nearly parallel to Romans 3:29-30, where Paul wrote, "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith."

There is probably little difference in meaning between these two possibilities, since Jesus is fully God, and God the Father is seen only in Jesus (John 14:9). Nevertheless, as Hodge says, "the analogy of Scripture... as well as the context" is in favor of referring it to Christ.

In my judgment, the perfect illustration of these points, embracing the combined truths of "one God and one mediator" is the statement the apostle Peter made when he was brought to the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius, as told in Acts 10. Cornelius was a devout man to whom God had given a vision of an angel who told him to send to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon Peter who would bring him a message from God. Cornelius sent two of his servants and a soldier, and while they were on their way, God gave a corresponding vision to Peter to prepare him for their visit. Peter "saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners" (v. 11). In it were many animals that were unclean according to Jewish dietary laws. Then Peter heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat" (v. 13).

Peter replied as any devout Jew would, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (v. 14).

The voice said, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (v. 15). This happened three times for emphasis.

About this time the men sent by Cornelius arrived, and Peter understood that the vision was in reference to their request. Normally a Jew of Peter's standing would not have entered the house of an "unclean" Gentile. But, being prepared by God, Peter went with them and arrived the following day to find a large gathering of people whom Cornelius had called together. "We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us," said Cornelius (v. 33).

Peter began, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. [This is] the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling

the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all" (vv. 3436). These are the exact same points Paul makes in Romans 10:12: that there is no difference between peoples and that the same Lord, in this case, clearly Jesus, is Lord of all. Peter then went on to explain the gospel, beginning with the appearance of John the Baptist to announce Jesus and continuing with the details of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Then he said, "All the prophets testify about him that *everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v. 43, emphasis added). Again, this is the exact point Paul makes in Romans 10:13.

As a result of Peter's explanation, Cornelius and the others believed on Jesus as their Savior, the
Holy Spirit came on them in a verifiable way, and they were baptized. The results were proof to Peter, as well as to those Jews who came with him, that, as Paul says, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Calling on Christ

Those words are from Joel 2:32, of course, as I pointed out earlier. What is so significant about them is that they conclude that great parenthesis in Joel's prophecy that looks ahead to the pouring out of God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost and to the proclamation of the gospel to all peoples
that followed the Spirit's coming. As a matter of fact, Peter quoted these exact words at Pentecost, saying, This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

> *"In the last days, God says,*
> *I will pour out my Spirit on all people.*
> *Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will*
> *see visions, your old men will dream dreams.*
> *Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out*
> *my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*

I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day
of the Lord.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Acts 2:16-21, emphasis added; cf. Joel 2:28-32

What does it mean to "call on the name of the Lord"? What did Joel mean, and what were Peter and Paul getting at by quoting him?

The words "call on" are simple words that embrace a great deal of truth. Sometimes they are used of *worship.* For example, at the beginning of the Bible, we are told of a time when "men began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26). That is, they acknowledged or worshiped him.

Again, there are times when the words seem to refer explicitly to *prayer.* A clear example is the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal in which Elijah issued a challenge: "You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire— he is God" (1 Kings 18:24).

A third use of the words is for *praise.* This is a frequent use in the Psalms, as in Psalm 116:1213:

How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

That is, "I will praise him."

In the New Testament the words often refer to *believing on* God or *trusting* God or Jesus. That is a fourth meaning. For example, in Acts 9 we are told of Paul's attempts to arrest all who "call on [Jesus'] name" (Acts 9:14, 21), that is, the followers of Jesus. The same meaning is present in 1 Corinthians 1:2, where Paul addresses the letter to "all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their

Lord and ours," that is, to those who believe on and are followers of Jesus.

This is what you and I are to do. If you are not a Christian, you have been ignoring the true God.
You have not been praying to him, and you are certainly not trusting him. Now you are challenged to reverse that entirely. You are to worship, pray to, and praise God—as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. Above all, you are to believe on Jesus himself and trust in what he has accomplished on the cross by dying for your sin.

The Bible's promise is that you will be saved if you will do this. That is, you will be saved from your sin and from the wrath of God that hangs over you because of it.

I do not care what your condition up to this point may have been. You may have made a shipwreck of your life and be sinking in the waves like Peter was when he started to walk over the Sea of Galilee to Jesus but then took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the churning sea about him. Peter was about to perish, but he called to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" and we are told that "immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him" and so rescued Peter (Matt. 14:28-31).

You may have been fighting Jesus like Paul had been trying to do earlier through his attempts to destroy Christianity. But when God stopped him on the way to Damascus, Paul called on the Lord Jesus Christ and was saved.

Perhaps you have been utterly ignorant of the gospel, like the Philippian jailor. But you have been alerted to your need, and you are calling out now as he did, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). You need to respond, like the jailor did, and commit yourself to Christ.

But don't put it off. You need to call on Jesus today.

Call on Jesus Now

In the summer of 1991, 1 was in northern Michigan to speak to student leaders of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. On the final day of my week there, when I did not have to speak, I drove to Sault Ste. Marie, where the impressive Soo Locks link Lake Superior with Lake Huron. Not far from the locks is a retired Great Lakes freighter, the *Valley Camp,* now turned into a maritime museum, and inside the *Valley Camp* are tragic remains of one of the greatest naval disasters of modern times, two badly mangled lifeboats from the *S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald.* This is her story.

The *Edmund Fitzgerald* was a Great Lakes freighter nearly a thousand feet long, almost as long as the Empire State Building in New York City is high. She had sailed to Duluth, Minnesota, to pick up iron ore, and now, during the first week of November 1975, she was making her way across Lake Superior to the Soo Locks to bring the ore to the industrial cities of the South. The first day out, a terrible storm moved down out of Canada to the lakes. That is common enough on the Great Lakes in the winter months, but this was a particularly bad storm, with waves reaching twenty-five or thirty feet in height. The captain of a freighter that was following the *Edmund Fitzgerald,* from whom we have sworn testimony to what happened, was worried.

Somewhere along the way, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* began to take on water and developed an increasingly strong list to starboard. She sank low in the water. The captain of the other ship kept in radio and radar contact, but the *Fitzgerald's* captain kept reporting that everything was all right.

The last communication from the doomed freighter was this tragic message: "We are holding our own."

Minutes later the ship headed into a wave that washed over her low-lying decks, and she never came up. In less than ten seconds the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank, with the loss of all twenty-seven people aboard. The captain of the ship that was following reported that she simply disappeared from his radar screen. One minute she was there.

The next she was gone forever, the prop that was still turning driving her directly downward until she broke into pieces on the lake bottom.

If you have not called on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, your state is like that of the stricken freighter. You are headed into judgment—and who can say how close you may be to the ultimate disaster?

Do not say, "I am holding my own."

Only a fool would say that when he or she is sinking, and you are sinking. Instead, call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. Do so confidently, because, as our text says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Chapter 150.
A Plea for Missions

Romans 10:14-15

When young William Carey, the acknowledged founder of the modern missionary movement, first applied to his church board to be sent to India, he received a classic reply. "Young man," said one of the older church leaders, "when God chooses to save the heathen of India, he will do so without your help." Fortunately, Carey knew better than that. He knew that when God determines that something is to happen he also determines the means to make it happen, and, in this case, the first step to the evangelization of India was the pioneer work of William Carey. Carey persevered, and the rest, as they say, is history.

No Conversions in a Vacuum

I think of that story as I come to Romans 10:14-15, mainly because of the placing of these verses in Romans. The verses themselves are a stirring plea for missions, one of the most important in the Bible. But much of their force comes from their setting in Paul's argument.

Think of the preceding verse: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v.
13). That is a wonderful statement of the universal application of the gospel. It is for everybody. Anyone who calls on Jesus Christ as Savior will be saved. But how can people do that unless they know about him? And how can they know about Jesus unless someone goes to them to teach them about him? Those are precisely the questions Paul has in mind as he begins this new section, asking: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?"

The answer is obvious: A person cannot hear the gospel and believe on Christ unless someone takes the gospel to him or her.

However, not only are these verses related to what has gone before, to verse 13. They are also related to what follows, to verses 16-21. For Paul, in this entire section (Romans 9-11), is dealing with Jewish unbelief, and he is going to show in the latter half of chapter 10 that the unbelief of Israel is not God's fault, since God had sent messengers to the Jewish people. Paul himself was one. He had preached the gospel, and he had done so clearly. If the Jews did not believe, it was not because they could not, since they had both heard and understood the message.

While we are at it, we should note that verses 14 and 15 are also related to the letter as a whole. One commentator on Romans, E. F. Scott, remarks, "This passage might seem to be only a digression, but it is central to the whole Epistle. More plainly than anywhere else Paul here discloses his purpose in writing as he does to the Roman church. He is coming to Rome in order to make it his starting-point for a new mission, and he needs the co-operation of the Christians in the capital."

Says John Murray, "The main point is that the saving relation to Christ involved in calling upon his name is not something that can occur in a

vacuum; it occurs only in a context created by proclamation of the gospel on the part of those commissioned to proclaim it."

In these verses Paul proves this point by giving us a series of linked statements, leading from an individual's calling on Christ in faith, backward through the mandatory intervening steps of belief in Christ, hearing Christ and preaching about Christ, to a preacher's being sent to proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ to those who need to hear him. In other words, the text is a classic statement of the need for Christian preaching and for the expanding worldwide missionary enterprise.

The First Necessity: Calling on Christ

The first thing that is necessary if a person is to be saved, as verse 13 has already said, is that he or she "call on" Christ. This verse alone proves the point, which I have already stressed many times in these studies, that saving faith, a faith that saves, is more than mere intellectual assent to certain truths about Jesus.

This is because the statement in verse 13 flatly distinguishes between "believing" (the Greek word is "faith") in Christ and "calling on" Christ for salvation: "How, then, can they *call on* the one they have not *believed in?"* Many people know about Christ. A significant number of these also probably believe that he is the Son of God and the world's Savior, as the Bible teaches. But they have never called on him in personal trust, and so they are not Christians. They are not saved. Saving faith, as I have said many times, has three elements: (1) intellectual content or knowledge, (2) personal assent to or agreement with that content, and (3) trust or commitment. The Latin words are: *notitia, assensus, and fiducia*. In this verse "calling on" Christ means the last of those three elements.

Let me make this personal.

It is not enough for you to sit under the preaching of the Word of God to be a Christian, important as that is. It is not enough for you to know theology or even to be a student of the Bible. I commend all those things to you, but they alone do not make you a Christian. To be a

Christian you must call on the Lord Jesus Christ personally, saying, "Lord Jesus Christ, I confess that I am a sinner. I cannot save myself, and I call on you to save me. Help me. Save me from my sin."

If you will do that and really mean it, Jesus will save you. In fact, he already has, because it is his work in you that leads to that confession. But I repeat: Intellectual belief is not enough; you must commit yourself to Jesus as your own personal Lord and Savior to be saved.

The Second Necessity: Belief in Christ

The second step in Paul's linked series of statements is that a person must believe in Christ in order to call upon him. Isn't that interesting? I have just said that mere intellectual belief is not enough. There must be personal trust or commitment to him as Lord and Savior. Yet this does not mean that the other part, intellectual belief or content, is unimportant. On the contrary, it is essential. For how can you call upon one you do not know? How can you ask Jesus to save you from your sin unless you understand and believe that he is the Savior?

Intellectual understanding without commitment is not true faith, but neither is commitment without intellectual understanding. If you must believe on Jesus in order to call on him, then your mind must be engaged in knowing who he is and what he has done for you.

The late Ray Stedman, who was a good friend and former pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church in California, knew Harry A. Ironside when he was pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago. He remembered Ironside describing a visit to Chicago by the flamboyant evangelist Gypsy Smith. Gypsy Smith got his name because he really did have a gypsy background, and he told many fascinating stories about growing up in a gypsy camp. On this occasion the message was made up almost entirely of these stories. At the end of the meeting, Gypsy Smith gave an altar call, and hundreds of people surged forward. Ironside used to say that he wondered what they were coming forward for. "Perhaps," he said, "they wanted to become gypsies."

The point was a good one, since one of the things that sets Christianity off from other world religions is that it deals with objective truth and with the facts of history.

Unless the facts are proclaimed, the message is not Christianity.

Unless the facts are understood and believed, the faith that follows is not true faith, regardless of its intensity.

The Third Necessity: Hearing Christ

The third of Paul's statements is that in order to believe in Christ a person must hear Christ. I repeat the last two words, "hear Christ," because that is what the verse literally says. The New International Version is mistaken when it adds the word "of so the text reads, "believe in the one *of whom* they have not heard." What it actually says is: "believe in the one *whom* they have not heard."

The point is that it is Christ himself who speaks to the individual, and that it is hearing him that leads first to belief and then to calling on his name in salvation.

This should not surprise us, of course, because this is exactly what Jesus taught. John 10 is a clear example. In that chapter, Jesus was speaking about himself as "the good shepherd," and he was explaining how his sheep know him and respond to his voice:

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:2-5, 14-16

There is a danger that some will use this emphasis on hearing Christ himself as an excuse for subjectivity. This happens when people say, "God told me so-and-so," and then follow it with something entirely unrelated to Scripture. Or when they say, "The Holy Spirit said..." and then add some personal desire or utterly unbiblical whim. We all know Christians who have used statements like this to justify behavior that is blatantly contrary to the Word of God.

But our passage provides two entirely adequate safeguards, even while stressing the need for us to "hear" Christ personally. The first safeguard is the step that has gone immediately before this, where Paul stressed the need for intellectual content or belief. This has to do with Bible truths and with the facts of Bible history. There is nothing subjective here. On the contrary, this is soundly objective. By linking the facts of the message to hearing Christ, Paul is saying that although Jesus speaks personally and individually to the one he is calling to faith, he does not do so apart from the truths of Scripture. He speaks to us not by leading us away from Scripture, but by leading us to Scripture and by speaking through Scripture. The subjective word is based on the objective revelation.

The second safeguard is found in the step that follows, namely, the "preaching" of God's Word by God's messengers. This means that the "word" of Christ is not whatever you might choose to make it. Rather it is the content of Christian doctrine as taught by qualified and appointed preachers. "The point," says Morris, "is that Christ is present in the preachers; to hear them is to hear him."

Jesus taught this, too, of course. When he sent seventy-two disciples ahead of him to preach in his name and prepare people for his coming, he encouraged them, saying, "He who listens to you listens to me," and "he who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16). It is the same today. When I (or any other minister) stands up to teach the Bible, if I do it rightly, it is not *my* word you are hearing. It is the Word of God, and the voice you hear in your heart is the voice of Christ. So, if you do not like what I am saying, do not get angry with me. I am only the postman. My

job is just to deliver the letters. And when you respond, do not think that you are responding to me. You are responding to Jesus, who is calling you through the appointed channel of sound preaching.

The Fourth Necessity: Preaching Christ

In speaking of this passage's second safeguard against subjectivity in hearing the voice of Christ, I have already moved on to the fourth step in Paul's series of linked statements, which are in the last analysis a great plea for missions. It is that for a person to hear Christ, someone must proclaim Christ to him or her. This is a strong statement for the necessity of preaching.

In his excellent commentary, Leon Morris emphasizes that "hearing" is a reflection of firstcentury life, when few people could read and communication was largely through the spoken word. He suggests that this does not exclude other valid forms of communication today, print media, for instance. That is true enough, of course. The gospel can be taught by qualified and appointed writers—Leon Morris is one—as well as by qualified preachers. But that aside, there is still something special and necessary about verbalized communication, particularly preaching, since it is through such preaching that God most often chooses to make the gospel known.

This was true of apostolic preaching. John Calvin wrote, "By this very statement... he [Paul] has made it clear that the apostolic ministry... by which the message of eternal life is brought to us, is valued equally with the Word."

It is true of preaching today, too, though in a lesser sense. Today's preaching is not valued equally with the Word, but it is through preaching that the Word is most regularly made known and blessed by God to the saving of men and women. J. I. Packer is right on this point when he says, "A true sermon is an act of God, and not a mere performance by man. In real preaching the speaker is the servant of the Word and God speaks and works by the Word through his servant's lips.... The sermon... is God's ordained means of speaking and working.

The divine commission to ministers is a commission to preach and teach, and the accompanying promise is that, if they preach the word faithfully, they will not preach in vain."

The Fifth Necessity: Sending Christ's Messengers

This brings us to the fifth and last step in Paul's linked statements about the way people are brought to call on Jesus Christ for salvation. It is his bottom line. He has indicated that people must believe in Christ before they can call on him. They must hear Christ before they can believe. There must be preachers of the Word if people are to hear Christ. Now he concludes that for Christ to be proclaimed to such people, preachers must be sent to them.

By whom? By God, of course. This is God's work; no one can take it lightly upon himself. It is why Jesus said, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:38). If God does not send the messenger, the message will not be blessed by him, and those who hear will not be saved. As Leon Morris says, "A self-appointed herald is a contradiction in terms."

But it is also true that messengers must be sent by the churches, just as Paul and Barnabas were sent on their missionary journeys by the Gentile church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). In fact, one of the objectives Paul had in writing Romans was to enlist the support of the Roman church in his plan to take the gospel beyond Rome to Spain and other places to *the* west (Rom. 15:23-29). The application for us is that if people today in unreached areas of the world are to hear the gospel and have the opportunity to believe on Jesus Christ, those who know Christ must pool their resources to send God's messengers to them. We must do it. A strong missions program is mandatory for an obedient church.

Four Applications

This has been a five-point study of Paul's text (one point more than was common even for

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great "four-point" preacher). Five points is a lot to remember. Nevertheless, here are four more quick points in conclusion. Each is a verse of Scripture.

1. *Matthew 9:37-38. [Jesus said,] "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."* These are our Lord's own words about praying for Christian missionaries. It is a recognition that God must call and send them. But I ask, "When God calls, will we be prepared to send them, too? Will we give our money to help make the gospel of salvation widely known?"

Let me share some facts with you. According to a recent report by the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, the world's population is about 5.3 billion people. Roughly one-third (1.7 billion) are people who would call themselves "Christian." Among the other twothirds, one-third (1.3 billion) have never heard the gospel, and the other two-thirds (2.3 billion) have heard it but are unconverted. The first group, which includes most of the western nations, accounts for 62% of the world's wealth. It spends 97% of that on itself. The remaining 3% is divided between secular charities, which get 1% of its resources, and Christian causes of all kinds, which get 2%.

Of that 2% allotted to Christian causes, 99.9% is spent in our own countries to provide for our own churches and Christian institutions. *Of the remaining .1 %, spent for Christian work abroad, .09% is spent on those who have already heard the gospel but are unconverted, and only .01% on the 1.3 billion persons who have never even heard the name of Jesus Christ.*

I am sure I do not have to emphasize that this represents a tremendous challenge for Christians who are serious about wanting to take the gospel to the whole world in obedience to the Great Commission.

2. *Second Timothy 4:2. "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."* If you are a preacher or Bible teacher,

even in a small class, do not be distracted from your primary calling by other useful but secondary things. Many things are important, but nothing is as essential as preaching and teaching God's Word. Be faithful to that task.

3. *Matthew 28:18-20. [Jesus said,] "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...."*

These are the words of the Great Commission in its best-known form, and they are for all Christians. So I add this reminder: Although not all Christians are called to be preachers or teachers, all are nevertheless called to be agents of Christ's commission. Ask God to give you opportunities to speak to others about Jesus and his death for sinners, and then be sure you actually do it.

4. *Second Corinthians 6:2b. "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."* This is for you, if you have not yet responded to the gospel by believing in and calling on Christ. There are billions of people who have never heard the gospel, but you are not one of them. You have heard it. I have been making it clear to you. What you need to do right now is to turn from your sin and call on Christ.

Chapter 151.
God's Beautiful People

Romans 10:15

The kind of work I do does not bring me into contact with the world's beautiful people very often. But I have been with them just enough to know that there really are "beautiful people," and my friends in California, who have far more opportunity to mingle with celebrities than I do, confirm it.

Some years ago a friend of mine from Philadelphia was hosting the then well-known singing star and actor, Pat Boone, and his wife. He called our home to ask if he could bring them by, since they were going to be filming something that evening and needed a place to rest for a few hours in the late afternoon. They were with us from about three in the afternoon until six. Mr. and Mrs. Boone really were beautiful. They had flawless features, perfect skin, immaculate grooming, and were meticulously dressed. They were obviously made (or remade) for the camera. And not only that. They smelled good. They seemed to be unlike other people. They were so perfect that I could only relate them to the poem about Richard Cory, who "glittered when he walked."

We are surrounded by a cult of beauty in our day, of course. Ever since the fall of the human race, people have valued beauty too much, usually neglecting the more important inner beauty of the soul. But at no time in history has physical beauty been at a higher premium than today. Movies and television are largely responsible, since they have created an entertainment-and beauty-directed age.

How different when we turn to our text! Though speaking of beauty, it is clearly speaking of a nonphysical kind of beauty when it says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom. 10:15).

Inner Beauty and Outer Beauty

A good place to start in trying to understand this text is by admitting that it is not a very attractive statement for most of us, and the reason is clear. We usually look at the outward appearance of things, including people, and we make our judgments on that basis. Moreover, we do not think of feet as beautiful. Regardless of what follows, when the text says, "How beautiful are the feet..." the idea seems quaint at best and probably even a bit repulsive. It becomes even more so when we remember that the feet of an ancient traveler would be dusty and smelly from the unsurfaced and unsanitary roads.

How strange that we think like this. We should know better. One of the things our grandparents used to say to us was: "Beauty is as beauty

does." But instead of thinking about actions, we think of beauty in terms of a perfect figure or a flawless face.

About thirty-five years ago, when I was in high school, I met another "beautiful person," Eddie Fisher, one of the singing idols of the fifties. It happened behind the scenes at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. I suppose it was because of that meeting that I have always had more than a usual interest in Eddie Fisher's life and career. He was married to Debbie Reynolds, dumped her to marry Elizabeth Taylor, and then was dumped by Taylor when she had her affair with Richard Burton on the set of the blockbuster movie *Cleopatra*. That was the way Eddie Fisher's life went, and it was rather sad. Yet I was pleased to read just a year or so ago that in an interview with a reporter, Eddie Fisher summed up his experience of America's cult of beauty by saying rather wisely, "I have learned that a pretty face is just a pretty face." It took him a lifetime to learn it.

What does the Bible say about beauty? You know the answer. In ancient Israel the people favored King Saul because of his large stature and good looks, but God rejected Saul and chose David, explaining, "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7b).

Similarly, the apostle Peter wrote to Christian women, saying, "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful..." (1 Peter 3:3-5).

The Beauty of God and God's Works

I do not mean to say by this that beauty is undesirable in itself. The Bible says that God is beautiful. In fact, several chapters before the one in Isaiah from which Paul gets the quotation he uses in Romans 10:15,

Isaiah tells the people, "Your eyes will see the king in his beauty" (Isa. 33:17), meaning that they would see God.

This was David's great desire, too:

> *One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek:*
> *that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,*
> *to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.*
>
> *Psalm 27:4*

God's creation is also beautiful, and so are the laws that govern it. In fact, when we conform to those laws, we can end up producing something beautiful ourselves.

There is an illustration of this truth in something Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), the world-renowned architect and engineer, once said. A student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asked Fuller whether he took aesthetic factors into account when he was tackling a technical problem. "No," he replied. "When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty. I think only of how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong. " I doubt Fuller was thinking of God when he said that, but he was nevertheless unwittingly testifying from his own area of expertise that God, God's laws, and God's creation really are beautiful.

Each of the wives of the patriarchs is said to have been beautiful: Sarah (Gen. 12:11, 14), Rebekah (Gen. 24:16; 26:7), and Rachel (Gen. 29:17).

Job's daughters were beautiful (Job 42:15).

In proportion to its length, the book of the Bible that uses the word *beautiful* more than any other is Song of Songs. There the husband rightly expresses delight in the beauty of his bride and the bride in the beauty of her husband. This teaches that there is a place for beauty in our lives and a proper appreciation of beauty among Christians.

Yet that is not the whole story. It is true that Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel were beautiful, but their beauty was a danger that led to the compromising behavior of at least two of their husbands, Abraham and Isaac. Bathsheba was beautiful, but her beauty contributed to the fall of King David. In the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is represented by a beautiful tree, but it was cut down (Dan. 4). Proverbs warns that "beauty is fleeting" (Prov. 31:30), and James says that the beauty of the rich and influential person will inevitably "fade away" (James 1:11).

Most significant of all, we remember Isaiah's description of the earthly appearance of Jesus Christ who, he wrote, "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, / nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2). If even Jesus Christ was not physically attractive, we should know that beauty is at best a matter of indifference and at times even a snare.

Beauty Is as Beauty Does

All that prepares us to turn back to our text in Romans. For when we are able to get the idea of mere physical beauty out of our heads, at least for a while, we can begin to understand what the text is saying. The first thing we notice is that the kind of beauty we find here is not descriptive beauty but functional beauty. In other words, it is the kind of definition our grandparents were speaking of when they said, "Beauty is as beauty does." They meant that true beauty is measured by gracious acts or by the gracious and faithful performance of one's duties.

The former Surgeon General of the United States, C. Everett Koop, has published a book of memoirs that contains an illustration of what I am talking about. At one point in his book, Koop expresses appreciation for the outstanding nurses he worked with during his days as Surgeon-inChief of the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. Working with a nurse who knows the way you think and can anticipate your moves and needs is one of the most satisfying things about surgery, according to Koop's testimony. He felt this deeply. So he tells how each Christmas he would hang a long sign over the door to the operating room that said, "Through these portals pass the most beautiful girls in the world." A few years later, when the Intensive Care Unit had developed to a

outstanding degree, he did the same thing there. Now there were two signs at Christmas that read: "Through these portals pass the most beautiful girls in the world."

Koop wrote, "The nurses knew I wasn't talking about superficial physical attraction; they knew that I appreciated the beauty of all the things they did to make possible our success in the operating room [and ICU]."

Romans 10:15 is also a functional definition, which means that the beauty it describes is that of someone who is *doing* something. And that is the second thing to notice: what the beautiful person is doing is bringing the Good News of the gospel to other people.

I said a few paragraphs back that the quotation is taken from Isaiah—Isaiah 52:7 to be exact, though there is a very similar text in Nahum 1:15. In Isaiah's setting, the passage is speaking of consolation for Israel during the years of Babylonian captivity, picturing a runner appearing on the hills to announce the fall of the people's enemies and the triumph of God's king. The image is the same as that of the well-known story of the Greek runner who made his way from the battlefields of Marathon to Athens to announce the Greek victory over the Persians in 490 B.C. The route was generally uphill for a total distance of more than twenty-six miles, and as soon as he arrived in the city and had gasped the word "Victory!" the runner fell dead from his efforts. It was in honor of this welcome messenger that the marathon race was run in ancient Greece and is still run today in many parts of the world.

But, like many Bible texts, there is even more to it than this. For as even the rabbis recognized, the messenger is the herald of the Messiah, which is appropriate since the next chapter (the continuation of the announcement) introduces us to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The salvation of the people from earthly enemies was undoubtedly good news, but a message of deliverance from sin is greater still. John Murray says, "As the prophecy found its climactic fulfillment in the Messiah himself, so it continues to be exemplified in the messengers whom he has appointed to be his ambassadors (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20)."

Paul is right on target when he says that the messengers of the cross are beautiful. They are beautiful because they are bearers of the gospel, which is the most beautiful message in the world.

The Elephantiasis Convert

Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of my predecessors at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, heard a story from a missionary in western Africa that is a moving illustration of what I have been writing. It was about a man who had the disease known as elephantiasis. In this disease the skin becomes thick and hard, and the limbs of the victim become enormously enlarged, much like the leg of an elephant, hence the name elephantiasis. The leg from the knee down to the foot can become as large as twelve to fifteen inches in diameter, and of course it is quite restricting and often painful. I have known at least one American who has this affliction.

But here is the story as Barnhouse tells it:

This poor victim of elephantiasis became a radiant Christian and could do nothing other than tell people of the grace of God which he had shown in sending his Son Jesus Christ to die for them. He lived in an African village and determined that every soul in the village should hear the good news of salvation. It was extremely difficult for him to walk with the monstrous legs which bore him about, but he thought nothing of the pain and toiled on from hut to hut to tell those who dwelt there about the Savior who had come into his life. Each evening he would return to his own hut where he was maintained by the kindness of his relatives. At the end of several months he was able to tell the missionary that he had visited every hut in the village and that he was now starting to take the gospel message to a village that was about two miles away.

Each morning he would start out painfully, walk the two miles to that village, go from hut to hut with the gospel, and return the two miles before sundown to his own hut. Finally, there came the day when he had visited every hut in the neighboring village. His work being done in

these two villages, he remained at home for some weeks but began to be more and more restless.

He spoke to the pastor and to the missionary, who was a medical doctor, about a village that lay ten or twelve miles through the jungle, and asked if the gospel were being taken to that village. As a boy, before he had been afflicted, he had traveled the jungle path to that village, and he remembered that it was a large village and that there were many people there, and he knew that they needed the good tidings of the Savior. He was advised not to think of going to that village, but day after day the burden grew upon him. One day his family came to the missionary and said that the man had disappeared before dawn and they had heard him go but supposed that it was but for a moment. He did not return, and the family was concerned about him.

Afterwards, the full story became known. He had started down the path toward the distant village. Step after weary step he dragged his leathery legs and gigantic feet along the path that led to his goal. The people of the village later told how he had come to them when it was already noon; his feet were further swollen, bruised and bleeding. He had been forced to stop and rest again and again, and it was already past mid-day when he came. They offered him food, but before he would eat he began to tell the people about Jesus. Up and down the village he went, even to the very last hut, telling them that the God of all creation was Love and that he had sent his only Son to die that their sins might be removed. He told how the Lord Jesus had been raised from the dead and had come into his heart, bringing such joy and peace.

There was no shelter for him in that village; and even though the sun was low he started on his way down the jungle path toward home. The darkness of Africa is a terrible darkness, and the night can bring forth many creatures from the jungle. The sun went down and the poor man dragged himself along the path in the darkness guided by some insight which kept him from going astray. He told his pastor later that his fear of the night and the animals which might come upon him was more

than balanced by the joy that he had in his heart as he realized that he had told a whole village about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Toward midnight the missionary doctor was awakened by a noise on his front porch. He listened, but all seemed still. Somehow he could not go back to sleep, and he went to the door with a light to see what had caused the noise. He recognized at once that the poor neighbor had returned to the village from his long trip, and had come with his wounded and bleeding leg-stumps to the door of the dispensary. The missionary called his helpers and they lifted the man, almost unconscious, and put him on one of the beds in the little hospital. The doctor said that he had seldom seen such a frightful sight as he looked upon those bleeding feet which had come back from such an errand of love and mercy. Unashamedly the doctor told how he had bent over those feet to minister to them, and as he cleaned and dressed them, he told how his own tears had fallen with the ointment upon them. The doctor ended the story by saying, "In all my life I do not know when my heart was more drawn out to another Christian believer. All I could think of was the verse in the Word of God, 'How beautiful are the feet of them that bring glad tidings, that publish peace.'" Here was a man who had been sent by God to tell the story of what Christ had done for him, and although he had to do it at the cost of such personal agony, yet he had not flinched but had gone through to the end to tell needy men the good news of salvation for their souls.

Beautiful Bilney

That is a very moving story, of course, as I said when I introduced it. But it is not unusual. For centuries, ever since the days of Jesus Christ, God's beautiful people have strategized and sacrificed and gone out of their way to bring the gospel to those they know need it.

Do you know how the gospel came to Hugh Latimer (1400-1555), that great bishop who became one of the brightest lights of the Protestant Reformation in England? Hugh Latimer was a "beautiful" man, strikingly good-looking and brilliant. But he did not know Christ, and he was using his learning to oppose the teachings of the Reformers,

especially that of Melanchthon, Martin Luther's co-worker and friend. Latimer was at Cambridge at this time, and there was at Cambridge a little monk whose name was Thomas Bilney. No one paid much attention to Bilney. But Bilney had discovered the gospel, and he wanted the great Hugh Latimer to come to Christ, too. "What a tremendous influence he would have, if only he would discover the gospel of God's grace in Christ," Bilney thought.

So he hit on a plan. One day after Latimer had been preaching, Bilney caught his arm as he was coming out of the church and asked if he would hear his confession. That was a prescribed duty of a priest. So Hugh Latimer listened to Bilney, and the little monk who had found Christ "confessed" the gospel, sharing how it had changed his life. Latimer later said that he was converted by Bilney's gospel "confession." As for Latimer, he became a great reformer in England and is best known for his encouragement of Nicholas Ridley as they were being led to the stake in Oxford at the height of the English persecutions in 1555: "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as (I trust) shall never be put out."

Bilney was not a beautiful person as we generally think of beauty. But he was the bearer of the gospel to Hugh Latimer, and that means that he was beautiful in the sight of God, just as are all those are who obeying the Lord Jesus Christ in carrying out the Great Commission.

May I suggest that you start thinking of beauty the way God does. What you think is beautiful now is going to be a thing of the past in just a few short years. Those you think beautiful now will no longer be beautiful in physical terms. But the beauty of the bearers of the gospel will last forever. What is more, they will go on getting more and more beautiful, as they use not only this life but eternity to praise the Lord Jesus Christ more fully.

Beauty really is as beauty does.

I invite you to value others not by their outward appearance, but by their service to Jesus Christ and the gospel. And I invite you to become one of God's beautiful people yourself. Our text tells you how.

Chapter 152.
The Sad Reality of Unbelief

Romans 10:16

Several thousand years ago, there was a man who was chosen to follow a great leader. The leader possessed outstanding religious and moral qualities, and the man I am talking about lived with him and learned from him for three years. He was part of a small group who were privileged to do so. In time this man became disillusioned with his teacher and eventually betrayed him to his enemies when he had an opportunity to profit personally from the betrayal. But then he became disillusioned with himself for what he had done. Disillusionment led to depression, depression to desperation, and desperation to despair. In the end he killed himself by hanging.

That man's name was Judas. His teacher was Jesus Christ.

We All Have "Failures"

In my library at Tenth Presbyterian Church are several dozen books that deal with evangelism, and I have noticed that they rarely speak of failures. They are filled with stories about people who almost always come to faith as a result of the evangelist's testimony. I understand that, of course. Books rightly try to be positive. Americans are success-oriented. Few people like to discuss their failures, but there are failures for all of us, even as there were for Jesus. (At least they are failures from a human point of view, though not from God's perspective.) My point is that we need to understand "failures."

Paul did. God gave Paul great success in his missionary work, enabling him to plant churches throughout much of the ancient world, particularly in Asia Minor and Greece. But Paul was too honest not to

describe his failures, too. One of the places he does so is in Romans 10:16, our text.

I remind you that the apostle has been describing the chain by which the gospel comes to an individual, enabling the person to call on Jesus Christ and be saved. It has five parts: (1) the sending of the messenger, (2) the preaching of the gospel by the messenger, (3) hearing the word of Christ as he speaks through the messenger, (4) the listener's believing the message, and (5) the listener's calling on Jesus Christ for salvation. That had happened many times in Paul's missionary journeys. But the apostle is nevertheless aware that it is possible to fulfill the two human parts of that chain—the sending and the preaching—and still have people fail to believe the good news or call on Jesus.

Isn't that the sad reality in this text?

"But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'" (Rom. 10:16).

It is as if Paul is saying, "I have preached the gospel in many places and to the best of my ability. God has blessed my efforts. But I want you to know—I am the first to admit it—that not all of my work has been successful. Not everyone to whom I have spoken has believed in Jesus Christ and become a Christian."

As the verse stands in most of our Bibles, Paul seems to be speaking about his efforts among Jewish people, and it is true that he is thinking in Romans 9-11 primarily about Jewish unbelief. That is why the New International Version has added the words "the Israelites" to this verse. But they are not in the Greek text, which means that what Paul actually wrote was: "But not *all* accepted the good news." "All" includes everybody. So what he is acknowledging is that there will always be what we would call failures in our witnessing, regardless of who we may be, where we go, or to whom we may be speaking.

And let me say something else. If Paul is talking about Jews primarily, which the NIV thinks he is doing, then the words "not all" must be what Leon Morris calls "a masterly understatement." Not all? "Hardly any"

would be more like it. What is more, those who rejected his message did not merely reject the message. They also rejected Paul, persecuting him so that he was driven from place to place and was often beaten and imprisoned.

When we read the account of Paul's missionary journeys in Acts and his personal description of his sufferings, particularly in the Corinthian letters, we expect that Paul might have become embittered. But the opposite was the case. Instead of making him bitter, the unbelief of his countrymen gave him such great sorrow that he was able to cry out at the beginning of this section of the letter, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom. 9:l-4a).

Unbelief is painful to those who know Jesus Christ, which is why I have titled this chapter "The Sad Reality of Unbelief." Unbelief is sad. But it is still a reality, which we must acknowledge if we are not to become discouraged and utterly ineffective in our witnessing.

A Significant Prophecy

"'Not discouraged,' did you say? How does that follow? I would think that acknowledging failure in advance would be the most discouraging thing one could possibly do," a person might be thinking. Although that might seem to be the case, it does not actually work that way. What really happens will become clear in this study.

The first thing we want to notice is that "failure" from a human point of view is something that all God's servants have experienced. Paul reminds us of this (as well as reminding himself) by quoting from Isaiah 53:1, that well-known opening verse of the equally well-known chapter on the Suffering Servant: "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" It is in the form of a question, but in spite of this, Isaiah seems to be saying that the people refused to

believe him. He preached, but his message was rejected, just as were the words of Jeremiah and all the other great prophets.

Yet there is more than that to Paul's choice of Isaiah's testimony to the reality of unbelief. I say this because, if we are only trying to think of Old Testament texts to prove that messengers of the gospel have been rejected throughout history, we can probably find better texts than this ourselves. How about, for example, Elijah's complaint from the desert beyond Beersheba? "The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:14b). Or how about the many passages in Jeremiah in which the weeping prophet complains that the people would not hear his message? If we were seeking an Old Testament text to show only that others have also had their message rejected, we could find stronger passages than the one Paul actually uses.

But, of course, Paul knew what he was doing. There are at least three reasons why he quotes this verse and not another.

1. *It comes very close to the verse he has just cited about the beauty of those who bring good news.* That verse was taken from Isaiah 52:7, and it was positive and encouraging, which was how I treated it in the last study. But Paul was aware that the prophet who spoke such encouraging words about the reception of the messenger who bore good news to Zion also acknowledged just eight verses later that the ultimate message of good news about the work of the Messiah was not and would not be believed. In other words, the verse is a healthy dose of realism.

2. *It is the introductory verse to the most important chapter in the Old Testament about the Messiah's suffering.* This means there is a link between the unbelief of the hearers and the content or nature of the message. It works two ways. On the one hand, it tells us that the people disbelieved (or would disbelieve) the message. On the other hand, it tells us that the nature of the message was the very

reason for their unbelief. It was not the kind of message they wanted.

So what's new? Today, if we preach a message suited to our listeners' wants or felt needs, we can gain a wide hearing. If we tell them that Jesus will give them treasure on earth rather than treasure in heaven, people will line up at the trough. If we tell them that Jesus will make them feel good rather than make them holy, people will clamor for the fix. If we tell them that Jesus died to cure them of their low self-esteem rather than their sins, they will pay for our glass cathedral. Much of the modern church-growth movement is built on exactly such reasoning. And it works! It works well. It builds mega-churches, and it makes the bearers of the "mega-gospel" rich—because it is what sinful people want to hear.

But it is not *the* gospel. The true gospel is a gospel of a crucified Savior, suffering in our place for our sins. That gospel is repugnant to the natural, unsaved man, and because it is, it will be rejected by him unless God first does a work of grace to turn him from his sin and error to the truth.

3. *It is a prophecy about the preaching of the gospel by Christ's messengers.* As I ponder this text, I find myself thinking that it is probably for this reason more than any other that Paul quotes it. In other words, Paul is regarding it as a prophecy of his own days and of precisely what he was experiencing. Isaiah had said that not all would believe the message of Christ's sufferings when it was preached, and that was exactly what was happening. This must have been an important encouragement for Paul, because he has already cited Isaiah to make the same point earlier, writing in Romans 9, "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, / only the remnant will be saved" (v. 27, quoting Isa. 10:22). He is returning to the same theme now.

Unbelief is not a welcome or desired response to our teaching, but it helps to know that this is what God has said will happen in many instances.

Four Kinds of Soil

This was Jesus' teaching, too. In Matthew's Gospel the very first parable Jesus tells is on this theme. It was about a farmer who went out to sow seed:

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Matthew 13:4-8

The disciples did not understand this parable at first, so Jesus explained it to them. The seed that is snatched away by the birds represents the case of those who do not understand the message and from whom Satan comes and snatches away even what they have. The scorched seed represents those who seem to receive the gospel but who are soon turned away by trouble or persecutions. The thorns represent the cares of this world and wealth, for which some barter away their eternal souls. Only a fourth part of the seed lands on good soil, sinks down, grows, and produces a crop.

This is what Jesus had experienced. He was rejected by many. Early in his ministry, most of his supposed disciples turned away. At the end even the Twelve forsook him.

It is also what the early preachers of the gospel experienced, which is why Jesus gave them the story—to prepare them (and us) for what was coming.

Let me be very practical at this point and say that what Isaiah experienced, what Jesus and the early disciples and Paul all experienced, is what you will experience, too—if you are serious about

spreading the gospel. You, too, will come up against the sad reality of unbelief.

Think of the kinds of people you will meet who will not believe.

1. *Those who are hard.* I mean by this those who have been hardened by sin, are addicted to vice, and over whom the devil has a very strong control. God is able to break those bands, of course. But it will often be the case that sin remains strong, and the devil snatches away the message even before it is fully understood or is allowed to do its work.

A few years ago I heard two Christian women talking, and one asked the other, "Why is America in such a declining moral state today?"

Her friend answered, "It is because the people love sin."

I suppose that there are other answers that could be given. But it seemed to me when I heard it that it was a perfectly adequate explanation and possibly the best that could be given. People love sin. And they are hardened by it. The problem with American culture is not that people have not heard the gospel. They have heard it. Most have also understood it. The problem is that they love sin rather than God. They do not want the gospel, because they are aware that to receive it they would have to turn from the vices they dearly love.

If you are in that category, the category of the willful and willing sinner, I grieve for you. Your danger is frightful. Here is a true story from the writings of Harry Ironside. There was a young English woman who had been brought up in a Christian home and had often been pressed to come to Christ. But she chose the way of the world instead. In spite of the pain it caused her father and mother, she chose to run with a wild crowd and repeatedly rejected the appeals made to her. One day she was taken with a serious illness. The doctor did all he was able to do in those days. It did not help, and she was expected to die in a short time.

One night this woman awoke out of a fitful sleep with a frightened expression in her eyes, and she asked excitedly, "Mother, what is Ezekiel 7:8 and 9?" "What do you mean, dear?" her mother asked.

The young woman answered that she had had a dream in which someone seemed to be telling her to read Ezekiel 7:8 and 9. Her mother did not know what those verses were, but she reached for a Bible and began to read them: "I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the LORD who strikes the blow."

The poor girl sank back onto her pillow with a look of horror on her face, and a few hours later she passed into eternity.

I suppose there are some people who might be able to take that story lightly, especially those who are being hardened by their sin. And I confess that for me it is secondhand. I did not know this family. Still I remind you that even if the story is not true, though I have no reason to doubt it, the verses I just read are in the Bible. It is God himself who has spoken them, and sin will be judged. Sin hardens hearts, and rejected grace only makes judgment more terrible.

2. *Those who are shallow.* The second kind of person who will not believe the gospel is the shallow person, represented by the rocky soil. There are many today. We are surrounded by shallow people, and we are often shallow ourselves—shallow in our thinking, shallow in our passions, shallow in our aspirations, shallow in our deeds. I think T. S. Eliot hit it on the head when he described our empty culture in "The Hollow Men."

> We are the stuffed men We are the hollow men
> Leaning together
> Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Alas, indeed! And that was in 1925, before television! I wonder what Eliot would say now, when television has swept over our culture like a plague, catching everyone in its ever more mindless and ever more embracing web. In Eliot's day, between the two World Wars, people were *refusing* to think. Today, millions no longer know *how* to think. If

the message is not mindless, flashy, and entertaining, they will not come to hear it. They cannot even think about their souls.

3. *Those who are choked by wealth.* In Mark 10:17-22, we are told about another of Jesus' "failures." A young man came to him who was spiritually earnest, seeking, and apparently quite moral. Moreover, he came asking the right question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Most of us would have given him a quick presentation of the gospel. But Jesus, who was interested in genuine discipleship rather than in mere numbers of followers, began to probe his understanding of who God is and what God requires of us. Although he reminded the young man of the law, reviewing it with him, the young man imagined he had kept it from his youth. Then Jesus got to the matter that was choking out the new life of the gospel. "One thing you lack," Jesus said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (v. 21).

The story ends with: "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth" (v. 22).

And Jesus was sad, too, because Jesus had loved him. Jesus told the disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (v. 23).

I know many people who are being kept from genuine discipleship because of wealth, and it is not always a case of their having it. In some cases they are merely trying to get it. Their minds are on the high salaries, the company bonuses, and on what those benefits will allow them to do and buy. And for this they perish! Like Esau, they are selling their souls for a bowl of stew. How different are Jesus' teachings! Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.... What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:24, 26).

Not Many Perhaps, But Some

But I cannot leave you on this note. The reason is that we have not yet exhausted Paul's statement nor the answer to Isaiah's provocative question.

"Not all... accepted the good news," Paul writes. No, but some did and some will. In the very next chapter, after he has explored the subject of Israel's unbelief a bit further, Paul will insist that *heat* least had believed the gospel and that God has always had a remnant of those who have refused to bow to Baal.

"Lord, who has believed our message?" asks Isaiah. Not many, true. But "not many" is not "no one." Though sparse of results at times, preaching has always been blessed by God to save some. It is not because of anything in them, of course, but because of the power of God in the gospel, which is what we will be talking about in the next study.

In the meantime, let's get on with the task. You are not responsible for the results. God alone is responsible for that. But you *are* responsible for obeying the Lord Jesus Christ in taking the message to others. And if you cannot explain the gospel well—bring them to someone who can. Bring them to where the Bible is taught and Christian theology is explained without compromise. And pray for them. The Bible says, "The prayer of a righteous man [or woman] is powerful and effective" (James 5:16b).

If you are one of the unbelieving ones—unbelieving because of your hard, shallow, or choked heart—know that you do not have to remain in your unbelief, however hard or shallow or entangled you may be. Turn from your sin and call on Jesus Christ now.

Someone has said, "On the great clock of time there is only one word: NOW." It is a throwaway statement, but it is true. *Now* is the time to pass from the sad reality of unbelief to the joyous reality of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Chapter 153.

The Bible's Power to Change Lives

Romans 10:17

During the decade I spent as chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (19781988), I listened to many sermons on the Bible, as well as preaching quite a few myself. But the best I heard was by Dr. W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas. He gave it at ICBI's first "Summit Meeting" in Chicago in the fall of 1978.

At the time, Criswell had been pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas for over thirty-five years. He had been in the ministry for more than fifty years, and he had been chosen to address this amazing gathering of 350 pastors, scholars, and leaders of the major para-church organizations on the subject "What Happens When I Preach the Bible as Literally True?" His answer was a *tour de force*, as he explained what had happened to himself, what had happened to his church, and what he believes happens to God when God's Word is thus used and honored.

About a year after Criswell had gone to the Dallas church, he announced to his already wellestablished congregation that he was going to preach through the Bible, beginning with Genesis and going right on to the last benedictory prayer in Revelation. "You never heard such lugubrious prognostications," he reported. People said it would kill the church. "Nobody will come to hear someone preach about Habakkuk, Haggai, and Nahum. Most people don't even know who those biblical books or characters are," they said. Criswell did it all the same, however. Much to everyone's astonishment, the problem that developed was not the demise of the church, but where to put all the people who were pressing in weekly to hear such biblical preaching. There were thousands of conversions, and today the First Baptist Church of Dallas is one of the largest, most effective, and most biblically sound churches in the entire country.

Scoffers abound. Critics multiply. But the lesson of history is the unique power of the Bible to change people's lives and build churches.

Hearing What?

This is what Paul is getting at in the verse to which we have come in our study of Romans 10, though there is some question among commentators about how it should be fitted in. Is it a digression? It could be, since Paul has spoken about unbelief in verse 16 and is going to deal with the unbelief of Israel explicitly in verses 18-21. Is it a throwback to what he has already said in verses 13-15? In my judgment, as well as in the judgment of a number of other commentators, the verse is best understood as a succinct summary of what has gone before.

I say "succinct" because the sentence as Paul wrote it has no verbs. The New International
Version has added two verbs to make the passage flow better for English readers, "comes" and "is heard." But what Paul actually wrote was: "So, then, faith by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." The very tone sounds like a summary of verse 14: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

In our text the idea of "hearing" occurs two times: "faith by *hearing* and "*heard* through the word of Christ." It makes us ask: "Hearing what?" There are two answers to that question.

1. *The gospel.* The first and most obvious answer is the message of the gospel, that is, the biblical message of salvation from sin through the work of Jesus Christ, as that message is preached by Christ's ambassadors. This is what Paul has been writing about in verses 14 and 15, showing that: (1) for people to call on Christ for salvation, they must first believe in Christ; (2) for them to believe in Christ, they must first hear about Christ (or, "hear him," as I said in an earlier study); (3) for them to hear Christ, someone must preach Christ to them; and (4) for someone to preach Christ to them, the messenger must first be sent. Everything Paul says in this section has to do with preaching the gospel. In fact, he will be

thinking along these lines in the next verses, too, for his point there will be that his countrymen have had the gospel preached to them and are therefore without excuse in regard to their unbelief.

If we look at the matter in a broader context, we can even say that this is what the entire letter to the Romans is about. It is the gospel. It tells us that when we were hopelessly lost in sin and under the threat of God's judgment, God acted to save us through the work of Christ. He sent Jesus to die for us, taking the punishment of our sins to himself, so that the love of God might go out to save the sinner. What is more, the salvation thus achieved is not only a salvation from the punishment due us for our sins. It is also salvation from the power of sin in our lives and eventually even from the presence of sin. It ends with glorification (Rom. 8:29-30).

This gospel is a glorious message, one the world very much needs to hear. It is why Paul calls it "the good news" in verse 16.

2. *Christ himself.* The large majority of commentators take the phrase "through the word of Christ" as an objective genitive, meaning that the word is the word about Christ or that he is the content of the message. That is a true statement, of course. It is what I have just been saying about the gospel. However, I am convinced that here, rather than being an objective genitive, the phrase "through the word of Christ" is actually a subjective genitive, which means that Jesus is understood to be speaking the gospel message or "word."

I have two reasons for believing this. First, this is the way the word of Christ was referred to in verse 14. In the earlier discussion of that verse I pointed out that the proper translation is not "the one *of whom* they have not heard," as the New International Version has it, but "the one *whom* they have not heard." The point I made there is that Jesus speaks through his messengers, so that those who hear the messenger to the extent of believing on Christ and calling on Christ for salvation have actually heard Jesus as he has spoken his truth to them and called them to faith. Jesus said that this is what he would do (see John 10:3-5, 16).

Since this is what "hearing Christ" meant in verse 14, it is right to see that earlier meaning in this verse too.

Second, if verse 17 only means "the word about Christ," the two parts of the verse are redundant, because this is what the "message" of the first part of the verse means. It would reduce to: "Faith comes from hearing the gospel, and the gospel that is heard is the gospel."

On the other hand, if "hearing Christ" is the meaning, an important truth is added. To paraphrase this a bit, the proper meaning of verse 17 would be: "Faith comes from hearing the gospel preached, and the reason faith comes from hearing the gospel preached is that Jesus himself, the object of the gospel as well as its subject, speaks through the messenger to call the listening one to faith."

Word and Spirit

This is a very important point, as I said. In fact, it was the chief discovery the Reformers made so far as the nature and function of the written Word of God is concerned. The way they talked about it was to stress the mutual working together of the Word of God (the Bible), on the one hand, and the Holy Spirit of God (the Spirit of Christ), on the other.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others had a very strong faith in the work of the Holy Spirit to convert, teach, and lead people. They knew verses like John 3:8 ("The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit"); 1 John 5:6 ("... And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth"); and 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 ("We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned").

But when the Reformers thought about these verses and others that stress the work of the Holy Spirit, they also remembered verses that taught the importance of the Bible in knowing the mind and will of God. They understood rightly that God speaks only through the written Word.

Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible is a dead book. That is why the man "without the Spirit" cannot understand it. But, on the other hand, without the Word as an objective guide from God, claims to a special leading by the Holy Spirit run to excess, error, or mere foolishness. Knowing the importance of both, the Reformers preached the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the transformation of Europe and the western world was the result.

Let me put the Reformers' doctrine back into the terminology of our text by saying: *When the Bible is preached, Christ speaks.* Isn't that what the verse says? And when Jesus speaks, his voice brings life out of death and his sheep awake from their spiritually lost condition and follow him.

In the sermon I referred to earlier, W. A. Criswell said, "No word spoken for God ever falls to the ground. Somehow, some way, in areas of life that we don't understand and don't know, God blesses it in his good purpose, in his electing choice, and in his heavenly time. That is the basis on which I have tried to build, with God's help, the congregation you call the First Baptist
Church of Dallas."

Let me say it again. The reason the Bible is powerful is that it is not the mere words of men, however insightful they may be, or even (do not misunderstand me here) the unique and inerrant Word of God, as important as that is. It is because God speaks to people through the Bible by the Spirit of Christ, and because that Word is life-giving and life-transforming.

"The Book That Set My People Free"

Maybe you are thinking that the Bible only works like that in America or in southern Bible Belt areas of the country, like Texas. If so, let me take you half a world away and tell you the story of Rochunga Pudaite, an Indian national from the people known as the Hmars. He tells his story in a volume titled *The Book That Set My People Free*.

The Hmars were at one time one of the most feared tribes in India. They had descended from Mongols who had come from central China, crossed the lower Himalayas, and settled in northeast India. They were headhunters, and when they fought they took heads that they hung over the doors of their bamboo huts. The British, who ruled India in those days, called them "barbaric tribesmen" and said they were almost like animals. When the British tried to enter the Hmar territory, the Hmars fought back. On one occasion they took five hundred heads in just one raid on a tea plantation. The soldiers pursued them. A few Hmars were killed, but most escaped back into the jungle, which is where they were when a Welsh missionary by the name of Watkin Roberts brought the Bible to their tribe.

Roberts was a chemist who had been converted during one of the great Welsh revivals of the last century, and when he read an account of the pursuit of the Hmar headhunters by British soldiers, he felt that God wanted him to take the Bible to them.

When Roberts arrived at the border of the Hmar territory in India, the British authorities would not let him proceed, declaring the area much too dangerous. So Roberts did the next best thing. He found some Lushais from a tribe adjoining the Hmars and began to translate the Bible into their related language. When he received a small gift for the work from a lady in England, he printed a few hundred copies of the Gospel of John and sent a copy to each of the tribal villages.

One of these copies came to the village in which Pudaite's father was living. A Lushai tribesman happened to be there and read the book to him. Pudaite's father could not understand what it meant to be "born again," and the neighbor could not explain it to him. He suggested that the chief invite the translator to the village.

When Roberts asked the British agent for permission to go, he was told not to enter the Hmar territory. "When I go in there, I take along a hundred soldiers for protection, and I can't spare a single soldier for you," said the agent. Roberts showed him the tribal chief's invitation but was told it was deceptive. "They only want to chop your head off," he said. Roberts went anyway and was able to explain the gospel to the people. After a week of teaching, the chief and four Hmar men announced that they wanted to make peace with the God of the Bible by believing on Jesus Christ. One of the four men was Pudaite's father.

This man, whose name was Chawanga, became one of the first Hmar preachers. He traveled all over the territory, teaching the Bible, leading people to Christ, and founding churches. These early Hmar preachers founded churches in almost every village. Many people came to Christ. They were tired of their fighting, drinking, and fear. When they became Christians they began living different lives. They began to work harder and built schools for their children.

Strangely enough, the British branded Watkin Roberts a troublemaker for his part in this tribal transformation and ordered him to leave. As a result, he left only a part of the Bible in the Lushai language.

The Hmars chose Rochunga Pudaite to do the Hmar translation. Although none of them had ever been out of their own area of northeast India, they sent Pudaite to a mission school and then to a college in India. The missionary worked with others to see that Pudaite was able to continue his education in Scotland and then in America. Pudaite did the translation and later became the new head of the mission Watkin Roberts had founded, the Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission, which later changed its name to the Partnership Mission.

Today, reports Pudaite:

The Hmars... have become one of the most advanced ethnic groups in all India. At least ninetyfive percent are Christians, worshiping in over 200 churches. Except for Mr. [Roberts], the only missionary they have had is the Bible.

Hmar population is now up to about 125,000. Eighty-five percent can read and write, a phenomenal percentage in India [and a higher percentage than the citizens of Philadelphia]. They have eighty-eight church-sponsored elementary schools, seven junior highs, and four high schools—one with an enrollment of about a thousand. They even have a good hospital, staffed by Hmar doctors and nurses.

One of our Hmars holds the rank of ambassador in the Indian Embassy in Yugoslavia. Another is the Indian *charge d'affaires* in Saudi Arabia. Another is the highest ranking civil servant in India. Another is the administrator of a large state. Every year the government gives tests to select the outstanding young men for government service. Only about twenty are selected in the whole country. For several years one or two Hmars have been in each group of winners. And there is only one Hmar for every 7,000 people in India.

The Hmars have also begun taking the gospel to other tribes, starting hundreds of churches in other territories. They have taken food to tribes that were starving. As for Rochunga Pudaite, he is now head of an organization called Bibles for the World, which has already mailed millions of Bibles to postal addresses in scores of countries and has a vision for mailing in this decade at least one billion Bibles to the more than one billion telephone addresses worldwide.

Pudaite says, "The Bible is the Book that reveals the mind of God, the heart of man, the way of salvation, and the blessedness of believers. It is the Book that tells us where we come from and where we are going. It is the Book that set my people free."

Faith by Hearing

I conclude with two important applications. The first is for believers. The second is for those who have not yet called on Christ.

First, if people can only be converted by hearing the gospel message, which is what Paul says, then believers must make sure they hear it. It is our responsibility to take the gospel to them and to send others to places

where we cannot go ourselves. Do not suppose that what you can do is unimportant or that God is going to save people without human messengers, by a direct word from heaven, for example. All who are saved are saved because Christians have done something to bring the gospel to them.

If you object that you were saved while sitting alone in your room, remember that it was by believing the message of the Bible that some Christian communicated to you somehow. It may have been by the direct word of a father or mother, an uncle or grandmother. It may have been years ago, when you were a child. It may have been more recently. But somehow, some Christian brought you the message about Jesus. Perhaps you did not have exposure to Christian teaching in your family. Perhaps you were converted in a distant city in a lonely hotel room through reading a Gideon Bible. Remember that somebody bought that Bible and somebody else put it there. If you were saved by a tract, some Christian wrote it, others published it, and still others arranged for it to get into your hands. It is the same if you have heard the gospel on the radio or on television or through a book.

The Bible says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." That is the way the salvation came to you. It is also the way it must go from you to others.

Second, a word for those who are not yet Christians. If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, you need to understand that our text is true and very accurate when it says that, "faith comes from hearing the message." How do people become believers? It is by hearing the message. And why is that so? It is because the Lord Jesus Christ himself speaks to them through the preacher to call them to faith.

So take advantage of the teaching. Listen to it. Find a faithful pastor who is teaching the Word of God Sunday by Sunday from his pulpit, and learn from him. Open your heart to the words that are being taught. One commentator wrote, "If you will open your heart now, and willingly pay attention to the good news that God has nothing against you, that he loves you, that he sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for you,

that Christ did die for you personally, and that he was buried, and that God raised him from the dead on the third day as the guarantee of your salvation—if you will open your heart to this, you will find faith coming to you."

"Faith comes from hearing." God has planned it that way. The message is being taught. Your part is to open your ears to that truth, trusting that, as you do, God will make the message true for you and that you will find yourself calling on the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Savior.

Chapter 154.
Excuses

Romans 10:18-20

We are coming to the end of Romans 10. There will only be one more study of this chapter, a study of verse 21 titled "The Outstretched Hands of God." So this is a good point to look back over chapters 9 and 10 to see where Paul's argument has brought us and where we are going.

I pointed out in the introductory study of this third major division of Paul's letter (chaps. 9-11) that Paul is dealing with the meaning of history in these chapters. He is asking in a general way, "Where is history going? What is God doing" in history as time goes by and one historical age succeeds another?" He is also asking, "What is God doing with Israel?"—an important question since the Bible concerns Israel so much. Specifically, Paul is asking, "Have God's purposes in regard to Israel failed?" This seems to be the case, because very few Jews had responded to the gospel.

If you remember that introductory study, you may recall that I outlined chapters 9 through 11 by seven answers Paul gives to that last question. He tells us that God has not failed, because:

1. All whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved (9:6-24).

2. God had previously revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be (9:25-29).
3. The failure of the Jews to believe was their own fault, not God's (9:30-10:21).
4. Some Jews (Paul himself was an example) have believed and have been saved (11:1).
5. It has always been the case that not all Jews but only a remnant has been saved (11:2-10).
6. The salvation of the Gentiles, which is now occurring, is meant to arouse Israel to envy and thus be the means of saving some of them (11:11-24).
7. In the end all Israel will be saved, and thus God will fulfill his promises to Israel nationally (11:25-32).

The entire tenth chapter has developed the third of those seven reasons, which means that we are coming to the end of the argument that the failure of the Jews to believe is not God's fault.

"Keep It Simple, Paul"

But maybe it isn't the Jews' fault either! Have we considered that? This seems to be the question Paul answers in these closing verses. I suppose it came about somewhat like this.

We may imagine Paul teaching these things on some occasion, expounding the details of election, reprobation, free will, human responsibility, grace, and the ways in which the gospel comes to those who need it. But when he pauses for a moment, someone raises his hand and asks a question. "That is all very interesting," this person says. "But is it really necessary to go into all that intricate explanation about words most of us can't even pronounce and can't define? Why do you have to justify the ways of God in that manner? Isn't it just simpler to say that Jews failed to believe because they just haven't heard the

gospel? Or, if they have heard it, perhaps they just haven't understood it. You theologians are always making things too complicated."

If something like that happened during one of Paul's teaching sessions—and it probably did happen, not once but scores of times—we can imagine the apostle answering exactly as he does in these verses.

"It might be nice if we could make excuses like that," Paul might have said, "but unfortunately we can't. The Jews have heard the message, just as the Gentiles are now also hearing it. The Bible says, 'Their voice [that is, the voice of the gospel messengers] has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' What is more, the Jews have also understood it. This is proved by Moses, who quoted God as saying, I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding,' and by Isaiah, who told us that God says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.'"

The bottom line of Paul's answer is that we cannot blame God for our lack of faith or even for a lack of understanding.

The First "Excuse": They Didn't Hear

Let's look at each of these excuses carefully, especially since they touch on our situation as well as Israel's. The first excuse is that the Jews were not responsible for their unbelief for the reason that they had not heard the message. Paul's answer is that they *hav*e heard it. He establishes this truth by quoting Psalm 19:4.

There are two problems with this proof. If Paul had merely said, "The Jews have heard the gospel, because I have preached it to them, and so have the other apostles," there would be no problem at all. It would be his testimony. But instead of appealing to what he had done, he quotes from Psalm 19. And as soon as we turn to that psalm, we find that the text deals not with preaching the gospel but with what theologians call the general revelation. It concerns the revelation of God in nature.

Psalm 19 is in two parts. The second part is about the Bible, telling us that the law of God is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, and so forth. The first part is about God's creation. It begins,

> The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies
> proclaim the work of his hands.

It is of this natural or general revelation that the verse Paul quotes was written: "There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard" (v. 3). That is, the existence of God is declared by what he has made. It is the point Paul himself developed in Romans 1. This natural revelation is of such quality and extent that all are guilty for their failure to acknowledge God, seek him out, and worship him.

The problem is that this general revelation is not the gospel, and it is the gospel that Paul is talking about in Romans 10.

How are we to explain this?

One way is to say that Paul *is* talking about the general revelation. This was the view of no less weighty a commentator than John Calvin, who held in addition that Paul was writing of the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles: "The argument is this—from the very beginning of the world God has displayed his divinity to the Gentiles by the testimony of his creation, if not by the preaching of men." However, despite Calvin's reputation and proven skill as an expositor, most interpreters reject this view, judging, rightly in my opinion, that the passage as a whole is about Jews, rather than Gentiles, and about the Christian gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, rather than about the general revelation.

A second approach to the problem is to assume that Paul merely borrows the words of Psalm 19 to make his point, but without intending to say that this is what the psalm teaches. Charles Hodge takes this view: "He simply uses scriptural language to express his own ideas, as is done involuntarily almost by every preacher in every sermon." This is a possibility, since Paul does not introduce the quotation by words like "Moses says," "God says" or "the Scripture says." On the other hand, as

Leon Morris notes, he does quote the verse exactly, word for word, which suggests that he really is appealing to the specific Old Testament passage for support.

It is probably the case—most writers take this approach—that Paul sees a connection between the first and second parts of Psalm 19, between the general revelation and the specific revelation, and that he does so rightly. In other words, he understands that the two forms of revelation are complementary and that what is said of one can generally be said of the other. Thus, when Psalm 19 insists in its first part, that the revelation of God in nature is continuous ("day after day" and "night after night," v. 2), abundant ("they pour forth speech," v. 2) and universal ("there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard," v. 3), this should be understood of the specific revelation, too. The revelation provided in the Bible is also continuous, abundant, and universal, and what is said of the Bible should be said of the preaching of the Bible's message by the Christian preachers.

John Murray takes this view, arguing, "Since the gospel proclamation is now to all without distinction, it is proper to see the parallel between the universality of general revelation and the universalism of the gospel. The former is the pattern now followed in the sounding forth of the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth."

The second problem with this quotation follows from what has been said. If Paul means, as I take him to mean, that the gospel has been proclaimed to everyone, just as the general revelation is made known to all persons everywhere, how can we believe him? Had all people everywhere really heard the gospel? In Paul's day? In ours? Had even every Jew? The obvious answer to this puzzle is that Paul is speaking representatively, as he does in other places, for example, in Colossians 1:23: "... This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant." He does not mean that every creature on earth at that time had literally heard the gospel, but that the gospel had been so widely

proclaimed that all types of people—Gentiles as well as Jews, slaves as well as free men—heard it.

Let me say, then, that if this was true in Paul's day, when the gospel was just beginning to be proclaimed throughout the world, it is certainly far more true today. Sometimes we emphasize the roughly one and a half billion people who have not even heard of Christ. It is right that we do. But how about the three and a half billion who have? How about you?

I have traveled over a fairly large portion of the world, and I can testify, as many others also can, that there are Christians nearly everywhere on earth and that Christian churches flourish in nearly every country. There are exceptions, of course. But nearly everywhere you go there is a Christian witness, so that we can say, as Paul does, "Their voice [that is, the voice of the messengers] has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." And today, not only have the messengers gone forth, but their voice has gone forth, too, by radio and through the printed word. In some countries, such as the United States, the gospel is proclaimed literally around the clock by radio.

So we cannot object, as this imaginary listener to Paul's teaching might be supposed to object: "But isn't it the case that they have simply not heard?" That is not a way of getting off the hook for most people. The message has been made known, and they have heard it—so they are without excuse. You are without excuse, too, if you have refused to come to Jesus Christ as your rightful Lord and Savior.

The Second "Excuse": They Didn't Understand

Yet the human mind and heart are quite subtle. "True," our imaginary questioner might say, "the Jews as a whole have heard and been acquainted with the gospel. But isn't it true that the problem might lie in another area, not that they have not heard but that they have not understood the message when it has been made known. Wouldn't that explain their unbelief?"

Paul's answer is another quotation, in fact several. He quotes from Deuteronomy 32:21 and Isaiah 65:1 (and, at the very end, from Isaiah 65:2, which we will come to in the next study).

> I will make you envious by those who are
> not a nation; I will make you angry by a
> nation that has no understanding.
> I was found by those who did not seek me;
> I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.

This is generally taken to mean: Didn't the Jews understand that the gospel was to be preached to the Gentiles? They did because the Old Testament (Moses, Isaiah, and other Old Testament writers) prophesied it. I do not agree with this. I think Paul means: Didn't the Jews understand the gospel? They did, because they were provoked to jealousy when the Gentiles, upon whom they had often looked disparagingly, believed it.

Do you see how this works? If Paul's countrymen did not understand the gospel of salvation by grace through the work of Christ—if it was utter foolishness to them—why would they have had such an emotional reaction when it was proclaimed among the Gentiles? It would have been just another example of Gentile foolishness in religious matters. "Who cares what the Gentiles believe?" they would say. "Let them believe anything they like, as long as we have our Judaism, which, as we know, is superior in every way."

But that was not the reaction Paul was seeing. Instead of detached indifference and smug superiority, there was jealousy and anger on the Jews' part. This indicated that they understood very well what was happening. They knew that the message being received by the Gentiles was a message of salvation by the grace of God apart from keeping the law and that it was being taught not as a contradiction of Judaism, but as a fulfillment of it. That is what made it so offensive.

That, and the fact that Christianity was being received by Gentiles of all people, these "nopeople," these ignorant and irresponsible people. For that is what the verses from Deuteronomy and Isaiah say about them.

Think how offensive each of these items would be, if you considered yourself to be among the privileged people of God, as the Jews did.

1. *"Those who are not a nation.* "This does not mean that the Gentiles were not organized into nations. They obviously were. It means that they were not a special people in the sight of God, as the Jews were. The Jews were the nation among whom God had worked exclusively for thousands of years, from the time of Abraham right up to the time of Jesus Christ. Now suddenly, if Christianity were true, their privileged position was being taken away and these "nopeople" were replacing them.

2. *Those who have "no understanding.* "This was literally true. The Gentiles, for all their vaunted philosophy and secular learning, were ignorant pagans spiritually. They understood nothing about the true God. They did not have the law. They did not know God's ways. So their ways ran to gross pagan vice and depravity. Paul described the Jews' superior self-awareness accurately in Romans 2, when he wrote, "You rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God.... You know his will and approve what is superior" (vv. 17-18). How offensive, then, to have the gospel received by the ignorant Gentiles.

3. *Those who "did not seek" God.* The Jews did seek God. This is how they would have described their religious life and quest. They sought him by trying to obey his revealed law and by keeping his ordinances. The Gentiles did not do any of this. They were happy-go-lucky pagans. Yet they were finding God in spite of themselves, if Christianity were true. You do not have to exercise your mind a great deal to appreciate how this must have worked on Paul's Jewish countrymen and turned them into angry, jealous, and offended opponents of Paul and the early preaching. Pilate they abhorred, but they could live with Pilate. They could endure the Roman occupation, just as they could endure their own corrupt and cynical politicians. But they could not endure Christianity.

Paul was quite right in saying that their anger toward the Gentiles showed that they understood the nature of the gospel very well.

Offended by God's Grace

So do people today understand the gospel, and they oppose it for exactly the same reason. Why do people hate Christianity? Why do they find themselves unable to be utterly indifferent to it? It is because of grace. Grace means that God saves the undeserving. Grace saves "nobodies," those who are "no people" in the judgment of those who are important. Grace saves the ignorant. Grace saves those who are not even seeking God, reaching out to confront them in their lost state and turn them from what is destroying them to the glories of salvation through Jesus Christ.

How the natural man hates that!

If God would only take note of who we are, if he would only pay court to our superior and advanced intelligence, if he would only at least credit us with trying—if he would do that, why, then, we would welcome the gospel and embrace him openly and enthusiastically. Instead, he insists that we come with no claims upon his favor at all. He insists that we accept his judgment when he says of us,

> *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks after God.*
> *All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good,*
> *not even one.*
>
> *Romans 3:10-12*

What is our problem? Is it that we have not heard the gospel? No, we have heard it—"Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." Is it that we have not understood the gospel? No, we have understood it all too well. That is why we are angry with those who have received it, and with God, who refuses to play by our rules and take note of our accomplishments.

Our problem is not that we have misunderstood grace. It is that we have *rejected* grace. It is because we will not bow our stiff, disobedient, and obstinate necks to God's gospel.

Yet there are those who do. Some are Jews, like the apostle Paul himself. He was a stiff-necked, self-righteous, angry Pharisee at one time. He was trying to stamp out Christianity. But God reached down to him in his sin, showing him how hard and sinful he really was and how desperately he needed a Savior. When Paul finally abandoned his self-righteousness and came to God as he was freely offered in Christ, Paul discovered grace and became the greatest champion of grace the world has yet seen. His letter to the Romans is a lasting testimony to his transformation.

There are also others, not great Pharisees like Paul but merely people who have been a "nopeople" up to now, people without any special spiritual understanding, people who have not really been seeking after God, people like you and me. We have found God, too. And the reason is the same: grace. It is because God was pleased to save us. There is no other reason. God has chosen "the foolish things of the world to shame the wise... the weak things of the world to shame the strong... the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

If you are making excuses, you are boasting still. Abandon your boasting. Forget your excuses, and come to the one who loved you and died for you in spite of them.

Chapter 155.
The Outstretched Hands of God

Romans 10:21

If we ever need proof that God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts, we should turn to the ninth and tenth chapters of

Romans. Romans 9 is about election, predestination, and reprobation. Romans 10 is about human responsibility.

Many people see these as hopelessly irreconcilable doctrines, supposing that if God elects to salvation, we cannot be responsible for rejecting the offer of salvation or, if we are responsible, salvation must be by works and not by God's grace. This was the argument of Pelagius in the days of Saint Augustine. Augustine answered, showing that these are not irreconcilable doctrines. Predestination and personal responsibility are two mutually supportive truths that need always to be held together, as Paul clearly does in Romans. When we do understand them, we see not only that they must be held together, but that the first is actually the solution to the second.

The progression is like this: first, human responsibility; second, the perverse exercise of human responsibility in rejecting God; and third, salvation by God's sovereign grace. Predestination could be described as "God's secret weapon," because apart from it no one would be saved.

In the last verse of Romans 10, we see what happens when the only working element in man's relationship to God is human responsibility. The result is unbelief. As Robert Haldane says, "We see what is the result, when God employs only outward means to lead men to obedience, and does not accompany them with the influence of his efficacious grace."

The Compassionate God

It is characteristic of Paul's method of teaching that he ends a reasoned argument with quotations from the Old Testament, establishing what he has just said. He did this at the end of Romans 9. He does it here as well. In fact, in Romans 10 he has already given us six quotations from the Old Testament: Joel 2:32 (in v. 13), Isaiah 52:7 (in v. 15), Isaiah 53:1 (in v. 16), Psalm 19:4 (in v. 18), Deuteronomy 32:21 (in v. 19), and Isaiah 65:1 (in v. 20). The seventh quotation is a continuation of the reference to Isaiah 65:1, since with it Paul simply moves on to the next

verse (v. 2): "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

This is a moving statement, because it spells out the nature of God's love in contrast to the disobedient and obstinate rejection of the love of God by human beings. The first part, the part that spells out the nature of God's love, teaches three things about it.

1. *It is continuous.* God pictures himself as holding out his hands toward Israel for an entire day. Have you ever tried to hold out your hands (or arms) for even a few minutes? It is a terribly difficult thing to do. In a short time it becomes excruciatingly painful. Very few persons could hold out their hands for even an hour. No one on earth could do it for a day. Yet God says he has done this continuously: *"All day long* I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

And what a day this has been! With God a thousand years is as a day, and a day is as a thousand years. Thus, the day of God's grace has already lasted over four thousand years, if we begin with Abraham—even longer if we begin with Adam and Eve.

Moreover, it is still continuing. The day of grace has not ended, and it will not end until Jesus returns the final time for judgment.

I want you to think of this personally, especially if you have not yet come to Jesus Christ as your Savior. The day of God's grace has been continuous with you, too. Forget the four thousand years since the time of Abraham. Think only of the years of your life, however long or short they have been. It may be that the time of God's outstretched love began in your childhood when a Christian mother or father told you about Jesus and urged you to commit your life to him. It may have continued into your youth through the godly influence of relatives, Sunday school teachers, or other concerned Christians who explained the gospel to you. It may have been part of your later life, if you are older. Indeed, it is continuing now, if you are not yet a disciple of Jesus Christ.

How many entreaties to believe on Jesus Christ have you heard? How many sermons have you sat through? If you have been attending a good

evangelical church for any length of time, I know you have heard the gospel there. Think how continuous and long-suffering the grace of God is. And remember this: If you reject the gospel, each entreaty, each warning, and each sermon will rise up to render you without excuse at the day of God's judgment. If you perish, no one will be responsible for it but yourself.

2. *It is compassionate.* The love of God for sinners is not only a continuing love. It is compassionate, that is, it is filled with passion for you. This is clearly taught in this text, for the picture of the constantly outstretched hands of God is meant to portray compassion. It is the posture of a parent reaching out to a crying child. It is the gesture of a husband to his wife or a wife to her husband. It is the gesture of Jesus, who reached out to us from the cross.

If you want to know what the hands of God are like, I encourage you to think of Jesus and his hands. We see them often in the gospels. One day Jesus was approached by a leper, a man with a loathsome, feared disease, a person no one would touch. "Jesus," we are told, "reached out his hand and touched the man" (Matt. 8:3). On another occasion, two blind men asked for healing. Jesus "touched their eyes... and their sight was restored" (Matt. 9:29-30). On still another occasion, Peter was walking to Jesus over the water, as Jesus had invited him to do. But Peter looked around, saw the tumultuous waves, lost faith, and began to sink. "Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him" and so saved Peter from drowning (Matt. 14:31). Jesus "put his hands" on little children and blessed them (Mark 10:16). As he ascended into heaven after his resurrection, he "lifted up his hands and blessed" those who were watching him depart (Luke 24:50). Jesus' hands were always healing, always blessing, always saving. They are compassionate hands.

I am sure also, though the story does not say so explicitly, that the hands of Jesus were stretched out toward Jerusalem when he came to the brow of the hill overlooking that great city and wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42).

3. *It is costly.* There is one more important thing to see about the outstretched hands of God. They teach us that the love of God is costly—that is, costly to God. Those hands bear the imprint of the nails brutally pounded through them as Jesus was affixed to the cross to bear the penalty for our sins. Someone has said, "No other god has wounds." Exactly! No other god has paid the price for redemption because of his continuing and compassionate love for us, except the God/man, who is Jesus Christ.

Disobedience and Passionate Unbelief

What has been the response to God's great love? This is what the second half of the verse is telling us. The response has been rejection. Two words summarize it.

1. *Disobedient.* When we think of the gospel, we usually think of it as an invitation, and it is true that the Good News is sometimes presented in that way. Jesus himself said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The Bible ends with an invitation: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17).

But what most of us forget is that the gospel is also a command. It is a command to turn from sin to faith in Jesus Christ and to follow him in obedient discipleship. Do you remember how Paul preached to the Greeks in Athens? He ended his address on Mars Hill by saying, "... we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he *commands* all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:29-31, emphasis added.)

Similarly, at Pentecost, Peter commanded the people, saying, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

It is a characteristic of people to labor strenuously to disobey this command. It was that way for Israel, and it is also true for people today. There is nothing we resist so much as a command, no command we resist so much as a command given to us by God, and no command given to us by God that we reject so much as the command to repent and turn to Jesus.

So the first thing set over against the love of God represented by his outstretched hands is disobedience.

2. *Obstinate*. Not only was Israel's response to the gospel one of disobedience; it was an obstinate disobedience. That is, it was hard-nosed, steely-faced, heart-encrusted, and doggedly persistent. So is ours. What was true of Israel is true of all natural human responses to God's love in Christ Jesus.

Jesus described this in a parable (Matt. 21:33-46). He told of a landowner who enclosed a field, planted a vineyard, dug a winepress, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased the land to those who were to tend it for him. At harvest time he sent servants to collect his rightful share of the crop, but the renters fell on the servants, beating one, killing another, and stoning a third. The landlord sent other servants, but they were treated the same way. At last he sent his son, thinking, "Surely they will respect my son." But when the wicked tenants saw the son, they said, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance" (v. 38). So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When Jesus asked his listeners what the owner would do, they said he would return and destroy the wicked tenants and "rent the vineyard to other tenants who [would] give him his share of the crop at harvest time" (v. 41). Then, anticipating exactly what Paul says in Romans 10, Jesus concluded, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (v. 43).

The picture is of obstinate resistance to the rights and love of God, and it describes what happened. The prophets were the servants. They had been beaten, killed, and stoned. Jesus was the Son. He was crucified.

Therefore, the kingdom was taken from these Jewish tenants, and the door of salvation was thrown open to the entire world.

But even this gospel was resisted. When Jesus was crucified, God did something that should have profoundly shaken every Jew who knew of it. When Jesus died, God tore the great veil of the Jerusalem temple in two. This was the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, and for centuries it had barred the way to God, on the grounds that sinful men and women could not simply barge in upon God's holiness. Now the veil was torn, signifying that the way to God was open. No longer was it necessary to be a Jew to enter the outer temple courts or a priest to enter the temple itself or the high priest to enter the Most Holy Place. Because of Jesus' death, the way was open, and anyone—Gentiles as well as Jews, women as well as men, slaves as well as free-born people—anyone could come to God through him.

But what did the Jews do? They just sewed the torn veil of the temple back together and went on with their exclusively Jewish worship. They rejected the witness of those who had seen the risen Lord, explaining the empty tomb as a theft and deception on the part of the disciples, and perpetuated their sacrificial system, which was now rightly superseded by the perfect sacrifice of himself by Jesus Christ, until the temple was at last destroyed by the Romans. The majority regarded the Christians as renegades and hated every extension of the gospel to the Gentiles, even though passages like those Paul is quoting in Romans foretold that this would happen.

A Terrible Contrast

Most commentators on this passage note the contrast between Isaiah 65:1, quoted in verse 20, and Isaiah 65:2, quoted in verse 21. The first describes how the Gentiles, who had not sought God, found him. The second describes how the Jews, to whom God had specifically and continuously offered a way of salvation, had rejected him. It is a great contrast. But to my way of thinking, the greatest contrast is not this but rather the contrast between the compassionate, loving God, stretching out his hands to save sinners, and the hardness of those who obstinately

turn their back upon him. It is this that makes what is being described at the end of Romans 10 so disturbing and so bad.

Once again I need to become personal. In ancient times God could say that he had repeatedly stretched out his hands to Israel. But in that Old Testament period Jesus had not yet come. His coming had been foretold, but he had not come yet, and there was undoubtedly great confusion about what the prophecies of his coming really meant. Besides, the prophets, although numerous over the years, were nevertheless infrequent at any given time in that history, and none of them had access to our amazing "modern" means for proclaiming the gospel.

What a difference today! If God was stretching out his hands toward Israel then, how much more is he stretching out his hands to men and women today. Today Jesus has come. And not only has he come, the meaning of his coming is understood and the messengers of the gospel have literally taken this Good News throughout the world. The gospel has been explained in magazines, tracts, and books. It is heard on radio. It is seen in movies and video tapes. It has been declared dispassionately, as men and women with acute minds and much knowledge have appealed to the reason of their hearers. It has been proclaimed emotionally and fervently, as preachers have pleaded with their congregations to turn from the sin that is destroying them and find salvation in Jesus, where alone it may be found.

What more can be done? Jesus said to those of his day, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn" (Matt. 11:17). He was referring to the contrast between the ministry of John the Baptist, which was a serious call to repentance, and his own which was more open, less threatening, and winsome.

Can we not say the same thing today? Preachers of the gospel have reasoned and debated, begged and pleaded, argued and cajoled, coaxed and implored. We have given reasons, argumentation, warnings, and motivations. We have preached and prayed. In the name of God we

have stretched out our own hands to sinners, pleading, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved..." (Acts 16:31).

But what has been the result? We have found exactly the same thing that both Jesus and Paul found. The unregenerate world is not interested in the gospel. And, if the truth is told, there are a good many apparent Christians who do not seem to be very interested in it either. They treat church attendance lightly, preferring to stay home Sunday evenings and watch television rather than worship God, who saved them, and allow the teaching of his Word to nourish their emaciated souls. They do not study their Bibles. They do not read Christian books. Their minds are flabby, and so are their spiritual muscles. They do not work for Jesus. They do not tell others about him. They do not even give money so that others can do the work in their place. They live for themselves. That is what they are doing. Are they not like those Paul describes? Disobedient?

As for the unsaved world—well, the unregenerate world crucified Jesus when he came the first time. It would lynch him again if it had the opportunity. It is against such hard and rebellious hearts that the love of God, symbolized by his outstretched hands, shines brightly.

But be warned. If what I have said describes you, if you have not yet come to Christ and are resisting him, know that one day those outstretched hands of God will become the hands of his judgment. For Jesus will himself be your judge. The Bible says, "The LORD will judge his people..." (Deut. 32:36). When the author of Hebrews comments on that text, he says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

What Shall You Do?

Fortunately that end is not yet here. Today is still the day of God's grace. And that is why we are going to find Paul moving back into the reign of grace in Romans 11, where he asks, "Did God then reject his people?" and will answer, "By no means!" citing himself as an example (v. 1).

But what of you? What should you do in this present moment? Some who look at the doctrine of election think it means you should do nothing because you can do nothing. That does not follow. You cannot save yourself. That is certain, which is why the gospel is a gospel of grace. If you could save yourself, it would be a gospel of works. You cannot make God be gracious to you, but you can listen to him as he speaks in the gospel. You can look to him and see his hands outstretched.

"Shouldn't I seek God?" you ask. Not at all! He is already seeking you, and if you think you are seeking him, you will inevitably fall back into trusting in your own efforts. Instead of seeking him, you need merely to be quiet and listen to what he says.

William R. Newell writes,

Should we not seek God? No! You should sit down and hear what is written in Romans: first, about your guilt, then about your helplessness, and then about the inability of the law to do anything but condemn you; and then believe on Christ whom God hath sent; and then praise God for righteousness apart from works, apart from ordinances! Hear how God laid sin, your sin, on a substitute, his own Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and that now, sin being put away, God has raised him from the dead. Seek God? No! God is the seeker, and he has sought and is now seeking those that asked not of him, and has been found by those who sought him not!—but simply heard the good news and believed!

Let me put it another way. God is calling you, and he is doing it exactly as Paul says he does in Romans 10:14-15. That is the way the gospel comes to everyone. First, the messengers are sent. Second, they preach the Good News. Third, the voice of Jesus is heard in the preaching. Fourth, the sinner believes. Fifth, the person calls on Jesus for salvation. You need to hear the message, because it is in the teaching of the gospel that the voice of God is heard and his outstretched hands are seen.

When Jesus first appeared to the disciples in the upper room following the resurrection, Thomas, one of the disciples, was not present.

Although told of the resurrection and that the others had seen Jesus, he was unconvinced. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it," he said (John 20:25).

A week after his first appearance to the disciples, Jesus appeared again. This time Thomas was present. Jesus held out his hands, showing Thomas his wounds, saying, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (v. 27).

Thomas did not even have to do that. Instead, he fell at Christ's feet, confessing, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28).

That is exactly what happens today as people read the Bible and hear it preached. They see Jesus in the Bible's pages. They hear him speak their name, and they come to him. In that moment the disobedience and unbelief of a lifetime fade away, and they find themselves calling out, "My Lord and my God!" It is a wounded hand that holds out salvation to you and invites you to come. Reach out and touch that hand. Then allow it to enfold you in an embrace that nothing on earth or in heaven will ever diminish or disturb.

Part Fourteen: The Times of the Gentiles

Chapter 156.
Has God Rejected Israel?

Romans 11:1

Ancient Bibles did not have chapter divisions, as our Bibles have. These were added later, the earliest appearing in Codex Vaticanus in the fourth century. Moreover, the earliest divisions were different from what we have now, and our present chapters came even later, in the Middle Ages. The divisions we have are certainly not from Paul. Still, when we come to the beginning of a new chapter, as we do now in our study of Paul's great letter to the Romans, it is natural to take the division seriously, look back over the distance we have traveled, and try to get a bearing on the matters still to come.

Has God's Word Failed?

The present discussion began in Romans 9, following Paul's magnificent statement about the believer's eternal security in Christ in Romans 8. It began in response to an obvious question: How can we believe in the eternal security of the Christian if, as we can clearly see, Jews as a whole are not responding to the preaching of the gospel and thus are not being saved? If Christianity is true, doesn't this mean that God has rejected Israel? If God has rejected Israel, how can we suppose that he will avoid rejecting us as well? And if he can or will reject us, isn't it true that we must reject the doctrine of eternal security?

Paul's immediate answer, in Romans 9:6, was that God's plans for Israel have not failed. To prove it he unfolds the seven main arguments found in chapters 9 through 11.

1. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *all whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved*

(Rom. 9:6-24). In this section Paul distinguishes between national Israel and spiritual Israel, which consists of those whom God has chosen to know Christ. His point is that membership in the visible Jewish nation did not guarantee salvation, any more than mere formal membership in a Christian denomination guarantees the salvation of church members today. What determines salvation is the electing grace of God in Christ, and that has always been a matter separate from any ethnic, national, or organizational distinctives.

2. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *God had previously revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be* (Rom. 9:25-29). If God had promised that all Jews would be saved and had then failed to save some of them, God's word would indeed have failed. But this is not the case, since God had foretold in advance that many Jews would not believe and would be scattered and that, in their place, many of the scattered Gentiles would be gathered to Christ.

3. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *the failure of the Jews to believe was their own fault, not God's* (Rom. 9:30-10:21). The Jews refused to believe because they wanted to earn salvation for themselves, even though Abraham, David, and all others who were saved were saved through believing God's promises concerning Jesus Christ. The majority wanted to be approved by God on the basis of their own good works and righteousness, and so would not submit to the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ.

4. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *some Jews (Paul himself was an example) have believed and have been saved* (Rom. 11:1). As long as even one Jewish person has been saved, no one can claim that God has rejected his people utterly. Paul was one, even if there were no others. But, in fact, the situation is not as grim as that. As the next section shows,

God has always preserved a considerable remnant of believing Jewish people.

5. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *it has always been the case that even in the worst of times a remnant has been saved* (Rom. 11:2-10). Paul proves this from the days of Elijah, a dark period but one in which, by God's own count, seven thousand Jews were still faithful to God, having refused to worship Baal. Seven thousand was a small portion of the nation, but it was still a sufficiently large number to derail the claim of anyone who might think that the plan of God had failed.

6. God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *the salvation of the Gentiles, which is now occurring, is meant to arouse Israel to envy and thus be the means of saving some of them* (Rom. 11:11-24). God has a right to do anything he wants with sinners. He can save whom he wants. He can condemn whom he wants. Still, condemnation seems rather harsh toward his ancient "chosen" people. "Is God merely writing them off?" we might ask. Paul's answer is that this is not the case. Rather, God is using the day of Gentile salvation for the good of Israel, since it is through God's work among Gentiles that Israel is being stirred from self-complacency and lethargy, and some are being saved.

7. Finally, God's historical purpose toward the Jewish nation has not failed, because *in the end all Israel will be saved, and thus God will fulfill his promises to Israel nationally* (Rom. 11:2532). This is so gracious and wonderful that Paul concludes with a benediction praising God's great wisdom.

Here is how Leon Morris traces Paul's thought:

Paul has made it clear that God is working out a great purpose and [has] insisted on divine predestination and election; the will of God is done. He has also insisted that human responsibility is real and important, and he has made it plain that this must be borne in mind when considering the fact that Israel has not entered the blessing as Gentile believers

have. What then does it matter to belong to the chosen people? At first sight, it may seem, not very much, for Gentiles may be saved as well as Jews. But it is far from Paul's thought that being a Jew matters little. He goes on to show that, while in the providence of God Israel's sin and unbelief have been used to open up the way for the Gentiles, now the conversion of Gentiles will lead to the conversion of Jews. The Jews still have a place in God's plan.

Charles Hodge looks at the argument of Romans 11 similarly, noting that it has two parts. "In the former [part] the apostle teaches that the rejection of the Jews was not total. There was a remnant, and perhaps a much larger remnant than many might suppose.... In the latter [part], he shows that this rejection is not final."

Godet adds, "This partial rejection... is not eternal, but temporary (vv. 11-32). For after it has served the various ends which God had in view in decreeing it, it shall come to an end, and the entire nation shall be restored, and with the Gentiles shall realize the final unity of the kingdom of God." This is an ending worthy of the benediction with which Paul concludes the fourth section of his letter.

Has God Rejected His Ancient People?

At the start of chapter 11, the point to which we have come in our verse-by-verse exposition of Romans, we are at Paul's fourth argument of the seven listed above. It is the shortest of the seven. Question: "I ask then: Did God reject his people?" Answer: "By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin" (v. 1).

What Paul says in this terse personal reference has been understood in two ways. One approach is based on the vehemence of his answer and supposes Paul to be denying that any Jew could suppose that God would abandon Israel. "More meaning can be attached to 'of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin' on this interpretation," according to John Murray. The problem with this view is that it turns Paul's reply into a mere emotional response, rather than an argument, and we are in the midst of a very clear set of reasoned arguments in this chapter.

The second view is the one I have assumed from the beginning of these studies, namely, that Paul is using his own case as proof that Israel has not been abandoned. As long as there is only one believing Jew—though, in fact, there are many—no one can affirm that God has rejected Israel utterly. Paul is a remnant by himself, whether or not there are any others. But, in fact, there are and always have been others, as the next section shows.

Why, then, does Paul speak so forcefully of his Jewish ancestry? In my opinion, it was in response to the many unkind things that must have been said to him about it. I have friends who are Jewish believers who report that when they accepted Jesus as the Messiah they were at once rejected as Jews by many of their former friends and family members.

In one case, in a Bar Mitzvah service, the male members of the family were invited to take part in the Torah readings, and a friend of mine who had become a Jewish Christian went forward with them. He was stopped by the rabbi, who claimed that he was no longer a Jew because he believed in Jesus. My friend's instinctive response, which is why I tell this story, was: "Are you telling me that I am not a Jew? How can you say that I am not a Jew? God made me a Jew. My mother and father were Jews. I am descended from Jews. I am a son of Abraham."

It is hard to suppose that Paul did not hear similar accusations many hundreds of times or that his response would not have been precisely what we find it to be in Romans. "Not a Jew?" he might have objected. "How can you say I am not a Jew? I am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin."

Each of those terms is worth exploring.

1. *An Israelite.* There are three names used to denote this ancient people: Hebrews (cf. Phil. 3:5), Jews, and Israelites. The origin of "Hebrew" is not known, though it may be derived from the name Eber, found in Genesis 10:21, 25, in which case it denotes a broader grouping of people than ethnic Israel alone. It would be similar to the word *Semite.* "Jew" comes from Judah, the

fourth son of Jacob by Leah and (later) the most prominent of the twelve tribes. This name stresses the people's ethnic origins. The distinguishing feature of "Israel" is that it is the people's covenant name. It was the name given to Jacob when he wrestled with the angel at the Jabbok and God blessed him (Gen. 32:28).

As soon as we recognize that "Israel" points to the covenant, we see that Paul's choice is exceedingly appropriate. For the question being raised in Romans is whether or not God can break covenant, and the answer is: Surely not! God never breaks a promise.

2. *A descendant of Abraham.* Nothing designates a Jew so decisively as being "a son of

Abraham." Therefore, Paul uses this phrase, too. In his case, of course, being a descendant of Abraham had Christian importance, for he had shown earlier that Abraham is an example of faith and that all who have faith are therefore Abraham's true spiritual children, both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Rom. 4:11-12, 16).

3. *Of the tribe of Benjamin.* Benjamin was small among the tribes of Israel, but it was significant beyond its size for many reasons. First, Benjamin was the only son of Jacob to have been born in Israel. The others were born on the far side of the desert in Paddam Aram. Second, Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, was within its territory. Third, Benjamin was the only tribe that remained with the tribe of Judah in the south at the time of the civil war following the death of Solomon. The northern tribes quickly drifted away from the forms of worship that had been given to Israel, set up apostate altars, became increasingly wicked, and were the first to be carried away into captivity (in 721 B.C.). Benjamin, in the south along with Judah, remained closer to God, preserved a larger measure of righteousness, and thus survived longer, until the conquest by Babylon (in 586 B.C.).

Martin Luther argues at this point that Paul had contended against God "with all this strength" and that "if God had rejected his own people, he

surely would have rejected the Apostle Paul." But thoughtful as this may be, it is not the point Paul is making. Paul is not arguing that he has been saved in spite of his sinful past, which would be an argument for grace, but that he is a Jew and is saved, which is an argument for God's faithfulness to his covenant. In other words, he is saying nothing new, but only what had been stated many times in the Old Testament.

When the people sinned by asking for a king and later confessed it, saying, "We have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king" (1 Sam. 12:19), Samuel answered, "Do not be afraid. You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.... For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own" (vv. 20, 22).

Psalm 94 speaks of God's judgment of the wicked and his disciplining of those he loves. Yet it also explains the discipline, saying, "For the LORD will not reject his people; / he will never forsake his inheritance" (v. 14).

Jeremiah quotes God as saying,

> *Only if the heavens above can be*
> *measured and the foundations of the*
> *earth below be searched out*
> *will I reject all the descendants*
> *of Israel because of all they*
> *have done.*
>
> *Jeremiah 31:37*

Paul was steeped in the Old Testament. So we can well understand his horrified and extreme reaction to the suggestion that God might somehow break his promises to Israel and cast his people off. Discipline? Yes. A remnant in times like the present? Of course. But cast Israel off? Abandon the covenant? Break the promises? How could God do that and still remain God? If that happened, truth, honor,

righteousness, and justice would be torn from the deity, and God would no longer be God.

In view of this argument, we can see why Paul does not only argue that some of Israel are being saved, himself being one example, but also maintains that in the end the fullness of God's blessing will be extended to the Jewish people nationally, and "so all Israel will be saved," as he says in verse 26.

A Few Applications

I realize, as I come to the end of this study, that much of what I have written has been analytical and technical and that its relevance to ourselves and our times is not readily apparent. But it is nevertheless a practical matter, and there are several major points of application.

1. *We should not be discouraged in our evangelism, because all whom God is calling to faith in Jesus Christ will come to him.* If anyone should have been discouraged in his evangelism, it should have been Paul in his attempts to reach the Jewish people. He was God's chosen messenger to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), but Paul always began his missionary efforts with the Jews and again and again he was rejected by them. In 2 Corinthians he describes how he had been beaten five times by the Jewish authorities and how he was in constant danger from them, as well as from Gentile rulers (2 Cor. 11:24, 26). Later, when he went to Jerusalem with the offerings from the Gentile churches, he was set upon by a fanatical mob and would have been torn to pieces if the Romans had not intervened to save him. Jewish opposition led to his imprisonment.

Yet Paul was not discouraged by this, because he knew that he had been sent to preach the gospel to all people and that those whom God was calling to faith in Jesus Christ would come to him. In Elijah's day, God had reserved seven thousand faithful Jews. In Paul's day, one by one God was calling out thousands more. So also today. Because God is calling to faith those whom he has chosen to call to faith, we, too, can

work on without discouragement and know that our "labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

2. *We should be warned against presumption.* It is true that all whom God is calling to faith will be saved, but this does not mean that all of any race, social class, or denomination will be. In the days of Elijah, God had seven thousand believers. But there were other thousands, no doubt hundreds of thousands, who did not obey God, worshiped Baal, and were not saved. They were Jews. Although they were outward, visible members of the covenant community, they were not what Paul earlier termed true "Israel" (Rom. 9:6). They were Abraham's "natural children," but they were not "children of the promise," because they did not follow Abraham's example by believing in the one who was to come.

Being a Jew did not in itself save these people, though there were great advantages to Judaism, as Paul acknowledges. Neither will membership in a Christian denomination save you, though there are also advantages to belonging to a good church. We must not presume on our affiliations. The Bible says to "make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). It means, be sure you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and that you are actually following him as your Lord.

The five foolish virgins of Jesus' parable thought that they were well off because they had been invited to the wedding banquet, had accepted the invitation, called Jesus "Lord," and were even waiting for his second coming—but they were not "ready" when he came (Matt. 25:1-13). Make sure that you are not among their company.

3. *We should put all our confidence in God, who alone is the source, effector, and sustainer of his people's salvation.* How foolish to put your confidence in anything else, or even in a combination of lesser things. If a person can be a Jew, with all the spiritual blessings attending to that great religious heritage, and yet be lost, certainly you are foolish to trust in your ancestry, nationality, education, good works, or (strange as it may seem) your good intentions. "Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). It

comes from God alone. Make sure that you are trusting him and what he has done for you in Jesus Christ. Make sure you are able to sing:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress,
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee.

4. *We must never take part in or yield to anti-Semitic attitudes or actions.* If God himself has not rejected the Jews in spite of their long history of willful sin, dogged disobedience, and fierce rejection of him—if he loves them still and has a plan for their eventual salvation as a nation—it is clear that you and I, if we are Gentiles, must not reject them either. We must never yield to or take part in anti-Semitism.

There are many blemishes on the church of Jesus Christ accumulated during the long years of its history, but of all those blemishes one of the most terrible and tragic has been the participation of so-called Christians in the persecution of the Jews. I know that not all, perhaps hardly any, of those actually persecuting Jews were true Christians. But that is another matter. Instead of hatred there should have been love. Instead of prejudice there should have been understanding. Let us determine that regardless of what the past has been, we will think and act like Christians—like Jesus himself, who died with arms outstretched even to those who crucified him.

We must love all men and women and seek to reach all without favoritism until Jesus comes again.

Chapter 157.

God's Remnant

Romans 11:2-5

Puul's letter to the Romans moves forward by rational arguments and statements, not by stories. But in Romans 11:24-5, the apostle touches on a great Old Testament story as support for his contention that God has not abandoned Israel and that the word of God has not failed. It is the story of Elijah, following his victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:1619:18).

The God of Elijah

Elijah had challenged the priests of Baal to a contest in which they were to ask Baal to send fire to consume the sacrifice on their altar, while Elijah would ask God to send fire to consume the sacrifice on his. When Baal failed and God answered spectacularly, sending fire to consume not only Elijah's sacrifice, but also the wood, stones, soil, and water in the trench, the prophet seized his opportunity and had four hundred prophets and priests of Baal killed.

It was a great victory.

But news of it reached Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, who told his wife, Jezebel, what Elijah had done. She was more wicked even than Ahab, and she swore to have Elijah killed immediately in swift retaliation. Elijah, who was undoubtedly exhausted emotionally by the earlier test of wills, lost confidence in God and fled on a forty-day journey into the remote wilderness of Mount Horeb, which is another name for Sinai.

The next morning God spoke to him. "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah replied in what is surely one of the most pitiful complaints in all Scripture: "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now

they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:10). Never mind that the Israelites had just responded to his challenge to execute the four hundred prophets and priests of Baal.

God did not chide his prophet, as we might have done. Instead, he took care of him, provided what he needed and encouraged him.

First, he gave Elijah a new vision of himself. He placed him on the mountain while a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire passed by. These powerful natural phenomena reflected God's strength and sovereignty, but God was not in them. Instead, after the wind, earthquake, and fire had passed by, God spoke to Elijah in what is described as "a gentle whisper."

God repeated the question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah gave the same answer as before. Then God told him to anoint two new kings: Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu as king of Israel. He was also to anoint Elisha to be his own successor as God's prophet. These three, the two kings and Elisha, would be a strong new team to help him. Finally, God said, "Yet I have seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18).

This is the story Paul refers to in Romans 11:2-5, quoting verses 10, 14, and 18 of 1 Kings 19 specifically.

The Flow of Paul's Thought

Since this account begins the fifth of Paul's arguments in Romans 9-11—in which he proves that the purposes of God for Israel have not failed and are, in fact, continuing—it will be useful to summarize and review them here, as we have done at each point at which a new argument is introduced.

God's purposes for Israel have not failed because:

1. *All whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved* (Rom. 9:6-24). What determines salvation is the electing grace of God in

Christ, and that has always been separate from any ethnic, national, or organizational distinctives.

2. *God had already revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be* (Rom. 9:25-29). This is a proof from prophecy.
3. *The failure of the Jews to believe was their own fault, not God's* (Rom. 9:30-10:21). The Jews refused to believe because they wanted to earn salvation for themselves, just as most people do today.
4. *Some Jews have believed and have been saved* (Rom. 11:1). Paul offers himself as an example.
5. *It has always been the case that even in the worst of times a remnant has been saved* (Rom. 11:2-10). This is the point to which we have come now. It is proved by the fact that even in the dark days of Elijah's ministry, by God's own count and revelation, seven thousand Jews were still faithful to God and had refused to worship Baal.
6. *The salvation of the Gentiles, which is now occurring, is meant to arouse Israel to envy and thus be the means of saving some of them* (Rom. 11:11-24).
7. *In the end all Israel will be saved* (Rom. 11:25-32). Together, these arguments are a powerful case for the irrevocability of God's covenant promises, even in the face of such strong human resistance and rejection as had been shown by Israel.

A Remnant Will Be Saved

The new idea in this argument is the "remnant." This word refers to a small surviving part of something, either an object or a custom or a people. We probably use the word most often to describe a bit of fabric left over from a bolt of cloth after most of it has been sold, or a remnant of carpet after most of the roll has been sold. In the Old Testament the

word refers in most cases to the small company of Jews who survived or were to survive the invasions, destructions, and captivities inflicted on them by the Assyrians and Babylonians in the sixth and eighth centuries B.C.

It is an interesting feature of this word that it occurs many times in the Old Testament (sixty-two times in all), but only three times in the New Testament (NIV). In each New Testament occurrence the reference is to an Old Testament text.

The first New Testament reference is in Acts 15, the chapter that describes the Council at Jerusalem. On this occasion the leaders of the church had met to discuss the place of the Gentiles in the expanding church and whether they were to be required to submit to the law of Moses, including circumcision and observance of the Jewish feasts. The decision was to free Gentiles from this Jewish yoke, and it was based in part on a quotation from the Book of Amos, cited by James (emphasis added):

> *After this I will return*
> *and rebuild David's fallen tent.*
> *Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,*
> *that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the*
> *Gentiles who bear my name,*
> *says the Lord, who does these things....*
>
> *Acts 15:16-17; quoting Amos 9:1112*

In these verses "remnant" refers to the Jews who survived the deportation by the Babylonians, who in the days of the apostles were being given renewed opportunity to seek the Lord and to whom, as the new people of God, believing Gentiles would be added.

The other two New Testament references are in Romans. We have already seen one. It occurred in chapter 9 in a quotation from Isaiah (emphasis added):

> *Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:*

"Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.
For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality."

Romans 9:27; quoting Isaiah 10:2223

The final New Testament use of the word *remnant* is in the passage we are studying.

We need to ask two questions in order to understand the text well.

1. *What do verses 2-5 add to verse 1?* If you have been following the argument, you will be aware that Paul has already proved God's faithfulness to Israel by showing that, even if no other Jew has been saved, at least he had been. And as long as there is one, nobody can claim that God has utterly abandoned Israel. At first glance, the verses that follow seem to be saying the same thing, only by using the story of Elijah and God's revelation of the existence of seven thousand who had not abandoned the true God and bowed to Baal. So do these verses really add anything?

The answer is that they *do* add something. In fact, they add two things.

First, they show that although God could have been faithful to his promises by merely saving *one* of the vast number of the Israelites, his grace extended far beyond that. There were seven thousand in Elijah's time, and by natural implication we are to assume that the same was true in Paul's day and is true in our day, too. Paul is answering the argument that God must have broken his promises since, for the most part, Jews were not receiving Christ and Gentiles were. He is saying that although the number of Jewish believers is proportionately small, there were nevertheless many who had believed. The numbers were not negligible. We remember that three thousand believed in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41) and that from that time on "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (v. 47). God is doing the same thing today.

Second, the use of Elijah's story shows that God's choice of a believing remnant, far from being an anomaly, has actually always been the case. The story in 1 Kings does not come from the very last days of the monarchies, when destruction by the Assyrians or Babylonians was just around the corner. It occurred somewhat earlier in Israel's history. But even at this earlier time it was the case that only a remnant was being saved.

Paul is grounding his experience and the results of the preaching of the gospel in his time in past Jewish history. He is showing that preaching in the first Christian century perfectly fits the pattern of God's ways.

2. *To whom is Paul referring when he speaks of "his people, whom he foreknew"?* This is an interesting question and one that has divided even the best commentators. I find them almost evenly divided. There are two possibilities. First, the words may refer to the nation as a whole, citing Israel as the "foreknown" or elect people of God. Or, second, they may refer restrictively only to the elect within Israel. F. Godet, John Murray, and Leon Morris hold to the first interpretation. John Calvin, Robert Haldane, and Charles Hodge hold to the second.

It is easy to argue for the second position, because Paul has already distinguished between national Israel and true Israel in Romans 9. Hodge starts at this point, arguing that it is the best position because (1) "it is precisely the distinction which Paul had made, and made for the same purpose, in chapter 9:6-8"; (2) "this is apparently Paul's own explanation in the sequel—the mass of the nation were cast away, but 'a remnant, according to the election of grace,' were reserved"; and (3) "the illustration borrowed from the Old Testament best suits this explanation." There is nothing wrong with this, of course. It is based on truth.

On the other hand, there are reasons for thinking that in this chapter Paul is thinking of the nation as a whole and is referring to Israel when he writes "his people, whom he foreknew."

There is no question, of course, but that Paul has been proving God's faithfulness to his people by referring to an elect remnant. Since God has elected some Jews, though a remnant, to be saved along with the believing Gentiles, it is clear that Israel as a nation has not been cast off. But here is the problem. In verse 1 Paul is talking about the nation. His question can be restated as: "Has God cast off the nation of Israel?" The answer is: "No, he has not rejected the nation, because he is saving some of them, and I am one." In other words, "his people" in verse 1 and "his people, whom he foreknew" in verse 2 must refer to the same people, and this people must be the nation as a whole.

Moreover, this is the direction in which the chapter is moving. For, when we get to verses 26-29, we find Paul writing, "And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

> The deliverer will come
> from Zion; he will turn
> godlessness away from
> Jacob.
> And this is my covenant with them
> when I take away their sins.

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (the quotation is a loose rendering of Isaiah 59:20-21 and 27:9).

Here is the way Godet describes what is happening:

Of all the peoples on the earth only one was chosen and known beforehand, by an act of divine foreknowledge and love, as the people whose history would be identified with the realization of salvation. In all others salvation is the affair of *individuals,* but here the notion of salvation is attached to the *nation* itself.... The Israelites contemporary with Jesus might reject him; an indefinite series of generations may for ages perpetuate this fact of national unbelief. God is under no pressure; time can stretch out as long as he pleases. He will add, if need be, ages to ages, until there come at length the generation disposed to open their

eyes and freely welcome the Messiah. God foreknew this *nation* as believing and saved, and sooner or later they cannot fail to be both.

Encouragement for Hard Times

The application of these truths in regard to Israel is what the rest of Romans 11 contains. We will be following it out in detail as we make our way through these verses. But there are also applications for us today, and this is the note on which I want to end this study.

1. *God always has a remnant, and the remnant is often much larger than we might suspect.* I think of Christians who are working in difficult places or under difficult circumstances—in an inner-city mission, for example. Or, as many did for years, behind the Iron Curtain. Or with a class of people who are particularly resistant to the gospel. Or with children who have turned away from God. If you have been called to such a work or been given such a concern, you may be in the depressed state of mind that overcame Elijah. You have worked hard. There have been meager results. What you have done has been misunderstood and rejected, perhaps even violently. You may be inclined to give up, thinking, "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me" (v. 3).

If you are thinking or feeling that way, you need to know that God still has his seven thousand who have not bowed down to Baal, that you are therefore not alone and that your work will not be without results.

Our problem is a simple lack of faith, which means that we judge by mere outward appearances and not by God's promise. Elijah was a great prophet, yet he made exactly this mistake. He could not see what God was doing, so he assumed that he was the only faithful person left.

Calvin says,

It follows, therefore, that those who evaluate the church on the basis of their own opinions are in error. And indeed if that distinguished prophet who was so endowed with the light of the Spirit was deceived in this way when he desired to reckon the number of God's people by his own

judgment, what will be the case with us, for our highest discernment, when compared with his, is nothing but dullness? Let us, therefore, form no rash decision on this point, but rather let this truth remain fixed in our hearts, that the church, which may not appear as anything to our sight, is nourished by the secret providence of God.... for God has a way, accessible to himself but concealed from us, by which he wonderfully preserves his elect, even when all seems lost.

If that does not comfort and encourage us, it is hard to know what can.

2. *The remnant of those who are God's people have not bowed to Baal*. Baal was a particularly corrupt god of the ancient Canaanites, whose worship persisted because of the failure of the Jews utterly to exterminate the Canaanites at the time of the conquest under Joshua. It consisted of blatant sex worship, coupled with pure materialism. In fact, the sex was meant to insure the materialism—for the practice of sacred prostitution was supposed to guarantee the recurrence of the seasons, with corresponding blessing on the crops from which came wealth in that society. We have the same thing today. Our western culture, particularly in America, is charging down the twin freeways of sexual promiscuity and blatant materialism. Only with us, the wealth is intended to insure the sex or sexual favors (or perhaps make them more pleasant), rather than the other way around.

What do we say in such times? Many, myself included, are inclined to be pessimistic. "The culture is wicked. Virtue is declining. Only I am left. I might as well give up."

But that is not the true picture. The culture may indeed be rushing down a slippery slope to damnation. But God has his remnant, nevertheless, and this remnant has *not* bowed its knee to the Baal of sex and possessions. There *are* devout people, who are living for God and trying to do the right thing, often in what are terrible circumstances. We should be encouraged to know this, seeking out such persons and encouraging them whenever we can. That is what the church is to be,

after all—the company of those who are living for God and are encouraging one another to live for him even in this present evil world.

So let us get on with it. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus" and so run the race set out for us (Heb.
12:1-2), whatever it may be. Moreover, let us run it, knowing that one day, like ourselves, all God's elect people will stand before him, having conquered this present wicked world. And though we will generally have been despised and persecuted, we will know that God has accomplished his perfect will in us and that nothing we have done for Jesus will have been done in vain.

Chapter 158.
Saved by Grace Alone

Romans 11:6

Two things must characterize any Christian. One is a profound sense of personal sin and unworthiness. The other is an overwhelming awareness of the grace of God. The two go together, of course, for without a proper sense of sin, we will never appreciate grace. We will think that the good we experience from God's hand is merited. On the other hand, the more we appreciate the grace of God, the more aware we will be of our sin and want to be free of it.

A Trophy of God's Grace

The apostle Paul was a trophy of God's grace, and he never forgot it. How could he? He had been raised in Judaism, but his understanding of what that required made him into a self-righteous man who thought that he above all others pleased God. It made him zealous to the point of killing those who disagreed with him. When Stephen was stoned to death, Paul was present to hold the coats of those who threw the stones. In fact, Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest more of the followers of Jesus and have them killed when the Lord appeared to him in a bright light, called him to faith, and redirected his energies.

What a miracle of grace Paul was! In spite of his deep self-righteous attitude and vicious acts, God saved him graciously, that is, by grace alone. From that time on Paul preached the grace of God everywhere and to everyone.

Most of the verses in the Bible concerning grace are from Paul. There are only eight occurrences of the word *grace* in the entire Old Testament (NIV), but there are 128 occurrences in the New Testament, and most of them are from Paul's sermons or in his letters. For example, *Acts 20:24.*
"I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

Romans 1:5. "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."

Romans 3:23-24. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Romans 5:15. "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!"

Romans 5:20-21. "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus
Christ our Lord."

Romans 6:14. "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

Romans 12:6. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us."

1 Corinthians 1:4. "I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."

1 Corinthians 15:10. "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

2 Corinthians 8:9. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

2 Corinthians 9:8. "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

Galatians 1:6. "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."

Galatians 5:4. "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."

Ephesians 1:5-8. "He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

Ephesians 2:4-8. "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.... in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved."

Ephesians 3:7-8. "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

2 Timothy 1:9-10. "[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior."

2 Corinthians 13:14. "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." *Colossians 4:18.* "Grace be with you."

1 Thessalonians 1:1. "Grace and peace to you."

1 Thessalonians 5:28. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

1 Timothy 1:2. "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."

I count eighty-one verses about grace by Paul, and these are only a few of them. Together they constitute the most profound treatment of this great doctrine in all the world's literature and assure us that the great apostle of grace was himself formed by it.

A Gratuitous Comment

Paul's love of this doctrine is the only reason I can think of for his having included the words about grace that we find in Romans 11:6. I

say this because they are really unnecessary at this point of the argument.

Charles Hodge calls this verse an exegetical comment on the last clause of the preceding one." And so it is. But the previous verse has already made the point: "So too, at the present time there is a remnant *chosen by grace*" (v. 5, emphasis added). And so has the one before it: "And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal'" (v. 4). The verse does not say merely, "There *are* seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal," but rather, "*I have reserved for myself* seven thousand..." (emphasis added). This is the work of God, and it is a gracious work. In the same way, Paul has spoken of the grace of God in salvation in Romans 5 and 6. Romans 5:12-21 is the most extensive treatment of the doctrine of grace in the Bible.

So why does Paul add __Rom11__verse 6 to Romans 11? It is because he loved this doctrine, saw it everywhere, and wanted his readers to see it and love it, too.

And also perhaps because he knew how difficult it is for most people to accept grace and how inclined we are to add works to it. I imagine that as he wrote the preceding verses, referring to the seven thousand faithful Jews from the days of Elijah's ministry, he would have thought that some readers would instinctively give those faithful Jews some credit and by extension give themselves a bit of credit, too. They would be thinking, "Well, it is true that those were dark days. But at least there were seven thousand who did not bow to Baal. Let's give them credit for that, and the Jewish people as well. There have always been Jews who have been faithful. Thank God we have the strong spiritual character we do!"

Because that kind of thinking comes naturally to all of us, and Paul knew it, he interrupts the natural flow of thought that would have led him to the distinctions between the majority of Jews and the remnant, which he develops in verses 7-10, to make sure we all understand that even the remnant exists by God's grace only. It is not that some had it in

them to be faithful while others did not. It is rather that God *chose* the remnant to believe.

God's Grace or Man's Works?

The verse itself makes only one point: that grace and works are incompatible opposites. So if a person is to be saved by grace, it cannot be by works; otherwise, grace is not grace. Conversely, if a person is to be saved by works, it cannot be by grace; otherwise, work would not be work. The footnote of the New International Version indicates that some ancient manuscripts include the second part of the contrast.

Calvin calls Paul's statement "a comparison of opposites," adding:

The grace of God and the merit of works are so opposed to one another that if we establish one we destroy the other. If, then, we cannot allow any consideration of works in election without obscuring the unmerited goodness of God, which Paul so greatly desired to commend to us in election, those fanatics, who make the worthiness which God foresees in us the cause of our election, must consider what answer they are to give to Paul. Whether it is past or future works which we are considering, Paul's statement that grace leaves no room for works will always resound in our ears.... He states that God was led to make this distinction for no other reason than his own good pleasure, and contends that any concession given to works detracts to that extent from grace.

Today we have many evangelicals who argue for salvation by grace apart from works. But if they are asked why some are saved instead of others, they do not give Paul's answer, which is the electing grace of God, but say rather that it is because of something God sees or foresaw as being in them. Either God foresees their good works, justifying them on that basis. Or else, he foresees their faith. He knows they will believe; therefore, he elects them. The first supposition is a repudiation of the gospel. It means salvation by works instead of faith. The second supposition makes "faith" a work, and thereby excludes grace.

What shall we say about faith, then? Where does it come in? The answer is that faith is a result of regeneration or the new birth and is therefore the product and not the cause of God's election. This is exactly what Paul said in those well-known verses from Ephesians that I quoted in part earlier: "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:4-5, 8-9).

Isn't it amazing how these great doctrines of grace hang together and reinforce each other! Election, foreknowledge, sin, grace, faith—they are a gallery of doctrines before which any regenerate and understanding mind must marvel, as Paul himself clearly did.

> Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> Was blind, but now I see.

A Reasonable Doctrine

Amazing Grace! Yes, but also not so amazing, at least when we consider how imperative grace is. We might even call it reasonable, not because we can give a reason why God should be gracious—there is no reason for grace but grace itself—but in the sense that, as Robert Haldane says, it is "necessarily and obviously implied in every other doctrine of the gospel."

1. "*Dead in transgressions.*" Sometimes people think they have a problem with grace, even more so with election. But the real problem people have is not with election, grace, or foreknowledge, but with the doctrine of depravity. There are only three possible views of mankind as far as sin is concerned. The first: Some deny it. They say that people are not sinners, at least not in any metaphysical sense. The worst they will say is that we are not perfect. We are evolving beings. We are getting better and better all the time. The second: Some admit the imperfections but argue

that it is possible to correct them. We can make ourselves better, if we want to. The third, the biblical view: We are so hopelessly lost in sin that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves or even to make ourselves better. We need outside help, the grace of God.

The first view may be described by saying that human beings are in great moral health. The second view says that we are sick. The third view says that we are dead so far as being able to do anything to help ourselves is concerned. We need a resurrection.

If this is true, how could salvation come in any way other than by the unmerited grace of God without any relationship to anything we might do?

"But surely God foresees which people will have faith," says someone. Really? If we are "dead in [our] transgressions and sins," as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1, what could God possibly see but an unregenerate and therefore spiritually dead heart, unless he should have determined beforehand to give faith to it? Or again, if as Paul says in Romans 3:10-11, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God," what could God possibly see in us but a nature obstinately determined to resist him at every cost? If we are to be saved, clearly it is going to have to be God's work from beginning to end.

2. *"You must be born again.*" A second doctrine that is perfectly consistent with grace and makes grace eminently necessary and reasonable is the new birth. When Jesus was talking to

Nicodemus, he told him that apart from being born again he could not "see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3) and a little later that he could not "enter the kingdom of God" (v. 5). Nicodemus did not understand very much of that. He began to think in physical terms rather than spiritually, asking, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born!" (v. 4). But at least he got the idea that, whatever Jesus was talking about, it was humanly impossible. How, then, can we be born again?

Jesus gave the answer when he said, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (vv. 6-8). If the new birth depends on the sovereign working of God's Spirit, then it does not depend on us, and we can no more control it than we can control the wind. Salvation will have to be of God. It must be of grace from the beginning to the end.

3. "*Through faith.*" If salvation is by grace and grace is opposed to works, then to be saved by grace through faith implies that faith is not a work. If it were a work, salvation would be by works; and, as we have already seen, if it were by works, "grace would no longer be grace."

What is faith, then? Faith is receiving what God gives. It is believing him and trusting him. Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, "Faith is not a blind thing; for faith begins with knowledge. It is not a speculative thing; for faith believes facts of which it is sure. It is not an unpractical, dreamy thing; for faith trusts, and stakes its destiny upon the truth of revelation.... Faith is the eye which looks.... Faith is the hand which grasps.... Faith is the mouth which feeds upon Christ." It is no credit to us to have an eye that looks or a hand that grasps or a mouth that feeds. These body parts are given to us by God. No more is faith a credit to the one who uses it, for it, too, is given by God and functions rightly only when it rests upon him.

Grace, Mercy, Peace

At the start of the two letters to Timothy, Paul has a greeting that is familiar to us, because it is used so often in benedictions to close a worship service: "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; cf. 2 John 3). Those three terms— grace, mercy, and peace—are worth thinking about as I bring this study to a close.

Grace has been the subject of this study. It refers to God's unmerited favor apart from anything seen or foreseen in us. It is utterly contrary to works. For work is something we do, and grace does not look to us but flows from the unfettered will of God.

Mercy is an aspect of grace. Indeed, it is almost the same thing, except that mercy has reference particularly to those who are pitiful. It looks on us and feels sorry for us. It reaches out to save us in Christ.

Peace is the last of these terms. It describes what comes to us as the result of God's grace and mercy. The first result is peace with God. God has made peace between himself and us by the blood of Christ's cross (Col. 1:20). It required an atonement. The second result is peace among human beings. By removing the need for competition, since all Christians have and are is of grace, God makes it possible for them to function peacefully within the church. The third result is personal. It is the peace that comes when we are embraced by the grace of God and know ourselves to be so.

It is for this that I call attention to those three words. As long as you are trusting to your own good works, you will never have personal peace of mind and heart, nor should you. For how can you hope to meet the righteous demands of the holy God? Live by works, and you will perish by works. It is like asking God for justice. Justice is what you will get, and justice will condemn you. But if you throw yourself upon the grace of God, trusting in Christ, then you will have peace, because your peace will depend not on your own imperfect works but upon Jesus' own perfect work for you.

After World War I, President Woodrow Wilson outlined "fourteen points" for a proposed peace settlement between the allied nations and Germany. At the time the French Prime Minister was
Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), who was difficult at the best of times and did not like
Wilson's proposals, probably because they came from the United States rather than from France. "Fourteen points?" he objected. "Even God

Almighty only has ten."

Actually, God's peace plan has only one point and it is that you give up trying to impress him with your sullied works and instead embrace Jesus Christ as your Savior. If you do, your experience will be like Paul's, who saw the depth of his sin and the glory of God's grace and from that point on was never the same and never stopped talking about it.

Chapter 159.
All of God: A Summary

Romans 11:7-10

There is a story about a rabbi who was trying to explain a Jew's way of thinking to a Gentile. "I'll show you how a Jew thinks," he said. "Give me the answer to these three questions. Here is the first. Two men fall down a chimney. One comes out clean and the other dirty. Which one washes?"

"That's easy," the Gentile said. "The dirty one, of course."

"Wrong," said the rabbi. "After they fall down the chimney they look at each other. The dirty one sees that his friend is clean and assumes he is clean, too. So he does nothing. The clean one washes because he looks at the other man, sees that he is dirty, and thinks that he is dirty, too."

"Here's the second question. Two men fall down a chimney. One comes out clean and the other dirty. Which one washes?"

"That's the same question," said the Gentile.

"No, it isn't," said the rabbi. "It's quite different."

"Well, then, I suppose it's the one who is clean."

"Wrong again," the rabbi replied. "The dirty one washes because he looks at his hands and sees that they are dirty. He washes. What could

be more obvious than that?"

"Here's the third question. Two man fall down a chimney...." "That's the same question again," said the Gentile.

"No," said the rabbi. "It's entirely different. What's the answer?" "I don't know," said the Gentile.

"Neither of them washes, because it's a ridiculous story to begin with. How could two men fall down a chimney and one come out clean and the other dirty?"

It is because of this kind of thinking that Jews say that whenever two Jews are together you are always going to find at least three opinions.

I do not know if there is any truth to that story and that saying. But whether or not such things can be said of Jews in general, they were certainly not true of the apostle Paul, who was an ardent Jew and a very careful thinker. Paul never held to two contrary opinions, and the single opinion concerning the gospel he did hold has been pursued in Romans with relentless and irrefutable logic.

It is time to sum up some of that teaching.

A Time to Summarize

A good teacher knows when enough information has been given out and it is time for a summary, and since Paul was a good teacher he seems to have been aware that a summary was needed at precisely this point in his letter. It is what Romans 11:7-10 is about. These verses are a summing up of what Paul has written thus far in Romans 9-11.

What has he written?

First, there is his teaching about *election.* He introduced the subject in Romans 9, showing that God's purposes in salvation have not failed because, even though the great majority of Jews had rejected the gospel,

those whom God had elected to salvation beforehand nevertheless were being saved. Later, in Romans 11, he provided examples of what he was talking about, indicating that he was among that elect number himself and that in the days of Elijah there were seven thousand who also fit that category.

Second, there is his teaching about *reprobation,* the doctrine that God passes by the many who are not saved, sovereignly declining to elect them to salvation. In Romans 10 Paul went to great lengths to show that this does not eliminate the guilt of those who are passed by, for we continue to be responsible for our own actions, including our unbelief, and it is for these sinful acts that we are judged.

Third, there is *the reason for man's rejection of the gospel.* The Jews are Paul's prime example, because he is discussing the fate of unbelieving Israel in these chapters. But it is the same for all persons apart from Christ. People reject the gospel because they want to establish their own righteousness and do not want to submit to the righteousness that comes from God. Paul discusses this in chapter 10.

Fourth, there is the teaching that *what has happened historically in the overall rejection of Christ by Israel had been foretold by God* and was therefore no surprise to God, nor did it cause a departure from his plan. In Romans 9, Paul gave four separate Old Testament quotations to make this point (Hos. 2:23; 1:10; Isa. 10:22-23; 1:9). In Romans 11:8-10 he provides two more: verse 8, which combines words from Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10; and verses 9 and 10, which quote Psalm 69:22-23.

Grace Equals Election

Yet Paul's summaries are never mere summaries. They always seem to carry his argument just a bit further, even in summing up. In this case, Paul's summary has the effect of highlighting the doctrine of election and thus brings him back to the point from which he started out.

Robert Haldane reviews the teaching in verse 7, asking, "What is the result of all that the Apostle has been saying? It is this: Israel as a nation hath not obtained righteousness, of which it was in search (Rom. 9:31), but the election among them—the chosen remnant reserved by God, spoken of above—hath obtained it." He then asks suggestively, "Can anything more expressly affirm the doctrine of election?"

You may have noticed in that quote that, in his summary of verse 7, Haldane used the word "election" rather than "elect" (NIV). Haldane is reflecting the King James Version, rather than the New International Version. The older version says, "the election hath obtained it." But this is not only a matter of translations. The facts are that Paul carefully uses the word "election" rather than "elect" and that this is the only time in the entire New Testament in which he departs from his regular usage.

Is there a reason? There seems to be, for "election" points more strongly than "elect" to the body of the redeemed whom *God has chosen*, which is Paul's chief point. If he had written only that "the *elect* obtained it," the wording might be seen as suggesting that salvation was something the elect were themselves able to achieve. When he says "the *election* obtained it," it is clear they obtained it only because God first gave it to them.

So I repeat again, as I have many times in these studies, salvation is not something any of us are able to earn ourselves. Salvation is entirely of grace (v. 6). In fact, taken together, verses 6 and 7 say that grace is election and that election is grace. Without one you just do not have the other.

Election and Reprobation

There is another thing we have to have in order to have election, and that is reprobation, the passing over of those who are not chosen. These verses are particularly strong in reinforcing this teaching.

But let's do a bit of review ourselves, particularly of the comparison I made between election and reprobation earlier in this volume. I do this here because the matter is disturbing to some people. The question I

asked before and now ask again is: Are the actions involved in these two doctrines to be thought of in exactly the same sense? Are they equally ultimate? That is, does God determine the destinies of individuals in exactly the same way so that, without any consideration of what they do or might do, he assigns one to heaven and the other to hell?

We know he does that in the case of those who are being saved, because we have been told that election has no basis in any good seen or foreseen in those who are elected. This is precisely what we saw in Romans 11:6, when we examined it in the previous study. The question is whether this can also be said of the reprobate, that is, that God has consigned them to hell apart from anything they have done, apart from their deserving it.

Here some important distinctions must be made. Election and reprobation are similar in at least two ways: (1) both originate in the eternal counsels or will of God, rather than in the will of man, and (2) both have the glory of God as their objective. But election and reprobation are also dissimilar in important respects.

Here are the two important points of difference.

First, when we refer to reprobation we refer to the reprobate being "passed by" (Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 3, sec. 7). Some will argue that in its ultimate effect there is no difference between passing by and actively ordaining an individual to condemnation. But while that is true of the ultimate effect, there is nevertheless a major difference in the cause. The reason why some believe the gospel and are saved by it is that God intervenes in their lives to bring them to faith. He does this by the new birth or regeneration. But those who are lost are not made to disbelieve by God. They do that by themselves. To ordain their end, God needs only to withhold the special grace of regeneration.

Second, we speak of God's ordaining the lost "to dishonor and wrath *for their sin*" (Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 3, sec. 7). That is an

important observation, too, for it makes reprobation the opposite of an arbitrary action. The lost are not lost because God merely consigns them to it, but rather as righteous judgment for their wrongdoing.

Of course, the most important thing to say about these doctrines is that they are taught throughout the Bible and are therefore to be believed by all who accept the Bible as God's faithful revelation, whether we understand them well or not. In the earlier study I mentioned:

Proverbs 16:4. "The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster."

John 12:39-40. 'They [the people of Jesus' day] could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, / so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.'"

John 13:18. Jesus said, "I know those I have chosen. But this [his betrayal by Judas] is to fulfill the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.'"

John 17:12. Jesus prayed, "While I was with them [the disciples], I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that the Scripture would be fulfilled."

1 Peter 2:7-8. "Now to you who believe, this stone [Jesus Christ] is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for."

Jude 4. "Certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you."

The clearest texts are in *Romans 9,* where "hate" is used of Esau ("'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,'" v. 13) and "harden" of Pharaoh ("Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he

hardens whom he wants to harden," v. 18). Romans 9 is the most forceful statement of double predestination in the Bible.

The Hardening of Israel

I said above that Paul's summaries, though summaries, always seem to carry his arguments a bit further. At this point I want you to see another way in which these verses carry the argument further. It comes by comparing Paul's teaching about reprobation in Romans 9 with what we have here.

Who was Paul using as an illustration of reprobation in chapter 9? The answer, as you can tell from the reference to that chapter above, is: Esau, the father of the Edomites, and Pharaoh, the nation's great enemy. Paul wrote that God "hated" Esau and that he "hardened" Pharaoh's heart. And so he did. No Jew would doubt that. Neither Esau nor Pharaoh was among the elect people of God. But here is the striking thing. In Romans 11 Paul is not writing about non-Jews,
Edomites, and Egyptians. He is writing about Israel, which means that he is applying the doctrine of reprobation to the allegedly "chosen" people.

What is more, he is saying that even those things that should have been a blessing to them— presumably the very things he lists at the start of Romans 9 ("the adoption as sons;... the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises... the patriarchs," vv. 4-5)—have become a "snare," "trap," "stumbling block," and "retribution" for them in their unregenerate state (11:9).

This is a critical point. It means that if the blessings of God are misused —and they always are misused unless we allow them to lead us to faith in Jesus as our Savior—they will inevitably harden our hearts, propel us into further sins, and eventually lead to even greater judgment.

There is a powerful statement of this principle at the very end of the Old Testament, in Malachi.

Those were bad days. The people, led by their priests, were far from God. They were so far from God that when he sent Malachi to rebuke them for their sins, their response was one of hostile surprise and confrontation. They retorted, "How have you loved us?... How have we shown contempt for your name?... How have we defiled you?... How have we wearied [God]?... How are we to return?... How do we rob you?...

What have we said against you?" when Malachi accused them of those sins (Mal. 1:2, 6-7; 2:17; 3:7-8, 13).

The priests were chiefly to blame for this attitude. So the strongest judgments are pronounced against them: "'If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,' says the LORD Almighty, 'I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me'" (Mal. 2:2). Sober words!

Blessings That Become Curses

Here is where this summary of Paul's teaching comes home forcefully to us. If individual Jews, who were a chosen nation, missed salvation because of their rejection of Christ and if, as a result, the blessings of God that had been given to them became a curse for these people, it is entirely possible (indeed probable) that many sitting in the evangelical churches of America today are also missing salvation because of their failure to trust Jesus in a personal way and that their blessings have become curses, too.

Do you understand that? It means that if you will not allow the good things we enjoy as allegedly Christian people to lead you to Christ, which is what God has given them to us for, they will be worse than worthless to you. They will actually be harmful and propel you inevitably into an even greater spiritual stupor, hardness of heart, and sin.

Here are four examples.

1. *Baptism.* Baptism is an outward sign of an inward, spiritual union with Jesus Christ. It is meant to strengthen our faith by making the inward reality more palpable to us. But countless allegedly Christian people have trusted the outward sign without the inward commitment. They have judged themselves to be saved persons without any true following after Jesus Christ. Therefore, the very thing that should have been an instruction and blessing to them has become a false ground of hope.

2. *Communion.* The same thing is true of communion. Entire branches of the church teach that grace is somehow imparted in the physical partaking of the elements, so that the physical act by itself conveys salvation. But the reality is not physical. The Lord's Supper is meant to show us the broken body and atoning blood of Jesus Christ and lead us to trust him and place our faith in *him,* not in the ceremony. If we do not trust Christ, the sacrament, which is intended to do us good, actually becomes a curse for us, and we become superstitious and even pagan in our practice.

3. *Material possessions.* I do not need to elaborate on this. Money and other material goods are from God. But they are dangerous, particularly when we possess them in abundance. They should lead us to God in gratitude. More often they lead us from him.

4. *The Lord's Day.* My fourth example is particularly timely. A short while ago the United States observed the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, which brought America into World War II and altered the course of history. It was a terrible disaster for this country, for it crippled the Pacific Fleet and claimed 2,403 young lives.

The bombing took place on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. What is not so well known is that after the defeat of Japan in 1945, General Douglas MacArthur took control of the archives of the Japanese war department and set translators to work on the enemy's papers. They discovered that in the years prior to the war, the Japanese had sent professors to the United States to study America's national character to

determine at what point and in what manner we would be most vulnerable to attack. Their combined reports judged that our guard would be lowest on a Sunday morning following a Friday on which both the Army and the Navy had a payday.

That is precisely what December 7, 1941 was. In earlier years, Sundays were sacred days of rest and worship for the majority of Americans, and even those who were not Christians respected them. But that had changed by the winter of 1941. Our day of national blessing had become a national hangover, and God turned this former blessing into a curse. That weekend at Pearl Harbor was a debauch of vast proportions, and we were unprepared and unable to meet the Japanese attack when it came.

Yet I must say, as terrible as the destruction at Pearl Harbor was, it was only physical and temporal—it is now long past—and it does not begin to compare with the spiritual condemnation of even a single eternal human soul.

Reasonable but Useless

There are probably some people, maybe many, who are taking this in an entirely mistaken fashion. You stopped following me after my review of election and reprobation, and you are now wondering, "What difference does all this make if election is true, as you teach, and I am not among that number?"

That is a reasonable question. But it is a useless one, because we do not know in advance who the elect or reprobate are. It is something hidden in the eternal counsels of God. Yet there is a way to find out if you are among the elect, and that is to turn from your sin and put your trust and confidence in Jesus Christ. That is what the elect do. If you will not have Jesus Christ as your Savior, even this clear summary of his teaching will become a curse for you. You will use it as an excuse to move even farther from Jesus and salvation. But you should not do that. Instead you should allow it to bring you to Christ, and then you will find it to be a blessing.

Chapter 160.
Riches for the Gentiles

Romans 11:11-12

To many people the doctrines of election and reprobation seem wrong because they appear to be arbitrary. "Arbitrary" means that there are no reasons for them. It means that God chooses one and not another as if he were plucking petals from a daisy, saying: "I love you.... I love you not.... I love you.... I love you not."

That is not an accurate picture, of course. True, we dare not think that God owes us an explanation for what he is doing or that we could fully understand it if he should give us a complete one. But even if we do not have an explanation, that does not mean that God does not have his reasons. God is a purposeful God, and we should rightly suppose that everything he does has a purpose, and an infinitely wise one at that.

However, God has given us some explanation of why he chooses some people and passes by others. We saw it when we were studying Romans 9. It is that God might be glorified, that is, that he might be known as he truly is. In Romans 9, Paul taught that God makes his patience, wrath, and power known in the case of the reprobate, whom he passes by and judges for their sin, and that he reveals his mercy in the case of the elect, whom he saves apart from any supposed worthiness in them.

But there is more. We remember that Paul is dealing with the meaning of history in these chapters, and this means that he is writing on what we might call a down-to-earth level as well as on a theological one. He has been talking about the passing by of the great mass of Israel, which has rejected Jesus as the Messiah. "Does God have a purpose in that?" we might ask.

The verses we come to now teach that God *does* have a purpose. God is using the passing by of Israel to bring salvation riches to the Gentiles.

Four Important Points

We are entering a new section of Paul's overall argument in these verses. They are the start of the sixth of the seven arguments I have outlined and reviewed many times already in this volume.

Therefore, this is a good point to look in a comprehensive way at what Paul says. In Romans 11:11-12, Paul makes four points that govern his thought throughout the remainder of the chapter.

1. *Israel has "stumbled," but their stumble is not final.* They fell down, but they will get up again. Earlier, Paul made the point that the unbelief of Israel is not complete; that is, there is and has always been a remnant. In this section he teaches that the unbelief of Israel will not be forever. They stumbled as a nation by their rejection of Jesus as their Savior and Messiah, but they will rise again.

2. *Their "stumble" had a purpose: it would be used by God to bring salvation to the Gentiles.* Later in this chapter, Paul will speak about the opening of salvation to the Gentiles as a

"mystery," something that was formerly unknown and hidden but is now revealed (v. 25; cf. Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3-4, 6, 9; Col. 1:26). Few would have suspected this from what is taught in the Old Testament, still less that the salvation of the Gentiles would be achieved by the Jewish rejection of Jesus. But such is the case! It is an example of the "riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" about which Paul will write later (Rom. 11:33).

It is a case of severe judgment resulting in great blessing!

Robert Haldane says of this point, "*We* ought to remember that the Lord may have infinitely wise and gracious motives for his most severe and terrible judgments."

3. *The salvation of the Gentiles will lead in time to the "fullness" of Israel, that is, to the salvation of the Jews as a nation, and this in turn will lead to even greater Gentile blessing.* If the salvation of the Gentiles was a mystery, this is an apparently greater mystery

still. It means that the Jews have not been cast off so that salvation might come to the Gentiles instead, but that through Gentile salvation the Jews themselves might find Jesus as their Savior.

4. *The way this will happen is by the spiritual riches of the Gentiles making Israel envious.* They will see what the Gentiles have, recognize that these spiritual blessings were intended for them, and long to possess them, too. Leon Morris expresses this rightly when he writes, "Paul is saying that the salvation of the Gentiles was intended in the divine providence to arouse in Israel a passionate desire for the same good gift."

Gentile Salvation

The first two of these points are unquestionably true, of course: (1) Israel has rejected Jesus, and (2) their rejection of Jesus has resulted in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. The Book of Acts tells the story.

We must remember that nearly all the first Christians were Jews, in spite of the fact that people from scores of nations heard the gospel and believed it as a result of Peter's preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2:15, 40). Acts recounts how in those early days "they continued to meet together in the temple courts" (Acts 2:46), and, as we learn later through the controversy over Gentile circumcision, they all undoubtedly continued to observe the ceremonies, sabbaths, rites, feasts, and holy days of Israel. This would have continued indefinitely, with Christianity becoming only a minority sect of traditional Judaism, were it not for the persecution that broke out as a result of the opposition to the gospel by the Jewish authorities.

Acts 4 tells how Peter and John, the chief leaders, were brought before the Sanhedrin and threatened with harm unless they should cease preaching Jesus. Chapter 5 tells of the arrest and subsequent flogging of all the apostles. Chapter 7 recounts the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, which seems to have triggered a general persecution. The text says of that event, "On that day a great persecution broke out

against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1).

The scattering caused Philip, one of the newly elected deacons, to go to Samaria, where he preached Christ and many Samaritans believed (Acts 8:4-7). Then God sent him south along the desert road to Gaza, where he explained the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch (vv. 26-39). Philip led him to Christ, and the eunuch carried the gospel back to his home in Ethiopia. Philip then made his way up the Gentile coast to Caesarea, where he seems to have settled down and carried on a long and effective ministry (Acts 21:8).

Paul's story is similar. Paul was converted on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians there. After his conversion, he might have stayed in that city except for Jewish rejection of Jesus and the consequent persecution. When "the Jews conspired to kill him," the disciples lowered the apostle over the city walls by night in a basket so he could escape (Acts 9:23-25). Paul had been living in Jerusalem before this and would probably have returned and settled there after his escape from Damascus, except for more persecution in the capital. When the Jews of Jerusalem tried to kill him, the disciples "took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (v. 30).

So also later, during the course of his missionary career. It was Paul's procedure to go to the Jewish synagogues whenever he entered a city. But his message was almost universally rejected, and when that happened he went to the Gentiles. This took him to scores of Gentile cities.

At Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13). "When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.... The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region" (vv. 45, 49-50). As a result, the missionary party went to Iconium.

At Iconium (Acts 14). "The Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.... There was a plot afoot... to mistreat them and stone them" (vv. 2, 5). As a result of this rejection, Paul and Barnabas took the gospel to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe.

At Lystra (Acts 14). "Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead" (v. 19). The next day, Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe.

At Thessalonica (Acts 17). On the second missionary journey, Paul and his new missionary companion, Silas, came to Thessalonica. Paul preached in the synagogue, as was his custom. "But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city" (v. 5). The trouble caused Paul to move on to Berea.

At Berea (Acts 17). At Berea those who rejected Christ caused trouble (v. 13), and Paul went to Athens.

At Ephesus (Acts 19). On the third missionary journey, Paul came to Ephesus. The riot at Ephesus caused Paul to leave that city and travel again through Macedonia.

In every place it was the same story. It was exactly as Paul later wrote in Romans: "Because of their transgression [he means the rejection of Jesus as Messiah and Savior by the Jews], salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious." Rejection and persecution have had that effect wherever the messengers of the cross have come. Rejection has always led to the spread of the gospel elsewhere. The great Christian apologist Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." So it has been.

Jewish Salvation

What about the third of Paul's four points? The first two are obviously true: (1) Israel has rejected Jesus, and (2) the rejection of Jesus by Israel

has resulted in the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles. The third point is that the salvation of the Gentiles would lead in time to the "fullness" of Israel, that is, to the salvation of Israel as a nation, and that this in turn would lead to even greater Gentile blessing. This has not happened yet, but it will happen.

In view of Paul's clear statements here and throughout Romans 11, 1 cannot see how so many reformed theologians of our day reject the idea of a future time of blessing for Israel. I know *why* they do it. They do not like the details of prophecy that some have worked out, in which Israel seems to have a separate destiny from the church. And they do not like the implied theology. To their way of thinking, any future blessing of Israel as a nation must be a backward step, a regression in God's plan. Spiritual realities in Christ have replaced the Jewish types that pointed to them. The church has replaced Israel. In this view the church becomes the new Israel, and the old Israel is superseded forever.

But how they can affirm that, in view of Paul's teaching here? Paul is not talking about spiritual
Israel in these chapters. He is talking about the Jews *as a nation.* And when he asks the question, "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" his answer is as emphatic as when he is dealing with antinomianism or with the good purposes of God's law (Rom. 6:2, 15; 7:13). "Not at all!" By no means! God forbid! It was inconceivable to Paul that God would cast Israel off, because to do so would mean that God would be breaking his covenant promises, and he could not do that and remain a truth-keeping, faithful God.

The Problem Is with Us

When we look at these three points, we have to admit that there are no real problems with them:
(1) Israel has rejected Christ, (2) their rejection has resulted in an extension of blessings to the Gentiles, and (3) the nation of Israel will yet be saved. The only problem is with *point four.* And it is not God's problem! It is ours. Why has the conversion of Israel as a nation not taken place? If we answer in terms of the mechanism given as an

answer in verse 11, the problem is obvious. For the most part, Gentile Christians have not lived in a way that would provoke anyone, let alone the Jews, to envy what they possess.

Does our conduct as Gentiles lead the Jews to desire what we have? Does it lead anybody to desire it? Honesty compels us to admit that our conduct has in general led to exactly the opposite result.

The sin is not entirely on one side, of course. Any Christian who has talked with Jews about Jesus must be amazed at the blindness that seems to have settled over most Jewish people. Even if they know their own Scriptures well, which most do not, they seem to go to incredible lengths to deny their clear teaching. Recently, an intelligent Jewish leader told a member of our staff, "Nowhere in the Scriptures is there a prophecy of an individual Jewish Messiah." This man takes the prophecies to refer to the nation collectively instead. There is much blindness.

But our sin is equal to theirs, or even greater. We know the gospel. We have the power of the Holy Spirit to live like Jesus Christ and show his love to all who are perishing, Jews and Gentiles alike. But instead of showing love to Jews, most Gentiles (even many genuine Christians) have shown the Jews prejudice and hatred. "Instead of showing to God's ancient people the attractiveness of the Christian way, Christians have characteristically treated the Jews with hatred, prejudice, persecution, malice, and all uncharitableness," writes Leon Morris.

He adds in what is surely a major understatement, "Christians should not take this passage calmly."

How Should We Evangelize?

Let us take it seriously. Let us take it seriously enough to ask: "How, then, should we evangelize?" and, "What kind of evangelists should we be?" Here are some suggestions.

1. *We should be friends to those we wish to win.* I do not mean to suggest by this that it is impossible to present the claims of Christ

to strangers. It is possible, and we should do it as God gives opportunity. But as striking as stories about speaking to someone on an airplane and having that person make a decision for Christ on the spot may be, most conversions do not happen that way. They happen as people who know Jesus as their Savior tell friends about him. The trouble with most of us is that we do not have many non-Christian friends, though we should have.

There is an emphasis today on what is called "friendship evangelism. "Joe Aldrich has written books on this subject. It is how the Billy Graham crusades are lifted up and carried forward, and the crusade workers train lay people in this area. I commend it to you.

2. *We should be models of help and service.* We should be models in this area even apart from any evangelistic interest, simply because we should be helpful and serving people. But, in addition to this, there is no doubt that many have been won to Christ by someone who helped them in Christ's name. Aren't you disposed to like and listen to someone who helps you? And aren't you turned off by someone who does not? Or is rude? Why should it be any different with unbelievers?

If you are serious about evangelism, you should seek ways to help others regularly. If you do not know how to do this on your own, find a program that will give you a structure for it.

3. *Let everything you do be characterized by love.* The distinguished missionary statesman E. Stanley Jones once asked the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi what Christians would have to do to win India for Jesus Christ. Gandhi knew India well, and he knew Christians well, too. He said, "There are four things Christians should do if they want to win India for Christ. First, Christians should act like Jesus Christ. Second, do not compromise your faith. Third, learn all you can about the non-Christian religions. And fourth, let everything you do be characterized by love." Gandhi knew the force of love, and he had seen much of its opposite, particularly from

Christians. So he spoke wisely when he reminded the followers of Jesus: "Let everything you do be characterized by love."

4. *We must verbalize the gospel.* We must act out of love, but we must also speak the truth of the gospel in love, because the gospel is truth and it is the truth of his Word that God blesses.

How do we do that in the area of Jewish evangelism? We have to be friends first, of course. We have to be helpful and show love. But, having done that and thus having earned a right to speak, we can begin by reminding the Jews of their own great religious heritage. We can remind them that there were many thousands of years of past history when Israel alone had knowledge of the true God. In the days of Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses, David and the other kings, Isaiah and Jeremiah and the prophets, only the Jews knew God truly. God was the God of Israel. Gentiles were outside of that great national body, and their religions were utter paganism. While the Gentiles lived in their paganism and its resulting moral degeneracy, the Jews were receiving God's moral law and were being taught the way of approach to God by sacrifices.

In that day, the only way a Gentile could be saved was by identifying with the Jewish nation. A few did. Ruth the Moabitess was one. Naaman the Syrian was another. But there were not many. Most Gentiles were cut off from salvation by geography and ethnic origins. Jesus was right when he told the Samaritan woman, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22).

But when God sent Jesus to be the Savior, he sent him not only to be the Savior of the Jews but as the world's Savior, too. When Jesus died, God showed this by tearing the veil of the temple in two from top to bottom. That act signified that the way to God was now open to anyone who would come through faith in his sacrifice. In one sense that meant the end of Judaism, at least in its ancient form. No Jew today worships at a temple in Jerusalem. No Jew brings the required sacrifices for sin. The end of that system was the opening of salvation to Gentiles.

It is the way I have been saved. Now by the grace of the God of Israel, I, a Gentile "dog," have been brought into the blessings that ancient Israel once enjoyed alone. I have been made a member of the covenant people. I have been brought by faith into the spiritual succession of the patriarchs.

I realize that the very name "Jesus" may be offensive to you if you are a Jew, and I can understand why. Christians, certainly Gentiles, have often behaved horribly toward Jews. But I ask you to recognize this: If Jesus is not the Messiah of Israel, then there is no hope for my salvation. I am a lost pagan, without hope and without God in the world. It is only by the Jewish Messiah and by the grace of the Jews' God that I am saved. That is why I commend Jesus so earnestly to you as your Savior.

Chapter 161.
Life from the Dead

Romans 11:13-15

The title of this study, "Life from the Dead," is taken from the phrase Paul uses for the anticipated salvation of Israel as a nation in the final days of world history: "If their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (v. 15). This is a tremendous prediction, a description of what can only rightly be called a national resurrection. But if we are to understand the resurrection part, both for Israel and ourselves, which is our goal in this study, we must begin with the part that speaks about death.

In our day Israel is spiritually dead, though she is to rise again, just as all persons are spiritually dead apart from the life-giving work of God in Jesus Christ. To deal with this important subject, I want to start not with the teaching of Paul in Romans 11, though we will come back to it, but with the teaching of Jesus Christ.

The Death of a Nation

During the last week of our Lord's earthly life, following his entry into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus focused nearly all his teaching on events that were to come. John's Gospel has one version of this emphasis; it tells us about Jesus' *private* teaching of the disciples. This instruction had to do largely with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the privilege of prayer, persecution from the world, and Jesus' promise to take care of his disciples and make them fruitful in his service.

The Synoptic Gospels focus on the Lord's *public* teaching.

What did Jesus teach publicly? I ask this question here, because the emphasis was along the lines Paul has been developing in the eleventh chapter of Romans and is the background for it.

Consider the twenty-first chapter of Matthew. The first part of that chapter describes Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by the cleansing of the temple. This angered the Jewish leaders, with the result that Jesus "left them" figuratively as well as literally (v. 17), returning to Bethany where he and his disciples spent each night of the final week.

The next morning on the way back to the city, Jesus saw a fig tree, which he approached, expecting to find figs. Instead, it was barren; so he cursed it, saying, "May you never bear fruit again!" (v. 19). This was not a rare case of pique on Jesus' part. Everyone can understand that. Rather it was a parable in which the fig tree represented Israel. The tree was supposed to have been fruitful, but it was not. It was judged for its barrenness.

This acted parable is then followed by a pair of spoken parables. The first concerned two sons, each of whom was told by his father to go and work in his vineyard (Matt. 21:28-32). One said he would go, but did not. The other refused, but later went. When Jesus asked which son did what his father wanted, his hearers replied rightly that it was the one who actually went into the vineyard and worked there. Jesus made this application: "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to

show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him" (vv. 31-32).

The point is obvious. It is not what we say that matters with God, but what we do, and what God requires us to do is to repent of our sin and believe on Jesus. The people as a whole had not done this.

The second parable is even more devastating. It concerned a landowner who planted a vineyard and leased it to tenant farmers (Matt. 21:32-44). He went away on a journey, and when the harvest came, he sent servants to collect his share of the produce. Instead of giving it to him, the tenants seized the servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. At last the owner sent his son, thinking the tenants would respect him. But instead of respecting him and receiving him well, the tenants killed him, too.

"When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Jesus asked.

The religious leaders answered that he would bring them "to a wretched end," then "rent the vineyard to other tenants," who would "give him his share of the crop at harvest time" (v. 41).

Jesus then made clear that in this parable God is the Father, he himself is the Son, and his hearers are the tenant farmers. He quoted Psalm 118:22, which says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," concluding, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (v. 43). This was an unequivocable statement that the kingdom of God would be taken away from the Jewish people and given to the Gentiles, which, of course, is exactly what Paul teaches has happened.

In the verses that are our text (Rom. 11:13-15), Paul speaks of Israel having been rejected (v. 15). In the verses we looked at in the last study, he made the same point by speaking of the people's "fall" and "loss" (vv. 11-12).

A Present Sad Reality

This is an all-too-sad reality, of course. As Paul saw it, the tragedy lay in Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, with all that entailed. For centuries the Jews had been waiting anxiously for the Messiah's coming, asking themselves whether any leader who emerged above the average might be him. This is what they asked John the Baptist. "Are you the Christ?" "Are you Elijah?" "Are you the Prophet?" (cf. John 1:19-21). If Jesus was the Christ, as Paul firmly preached he was, Israel's rejection of Jesus was a rejection of the very future for which they had been hoping. It was a repudiation of their spiritual destiny. Paul was acutely aware of this and grieved for what his people had lost.

But even that is not the worst that had happened. If Jesus was the Messiah, the kingdom of God was wrapped up in him and to reject him was to reject or lose that kingdom.

This means that by rejecting Jesus, Israel lost all that was truly spiritual in their heritage. They still had their feasts and celebrations, of course, but they lost what those important celebrations stood for. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a chief example. On that day the high priest was to perform two important acts. First, he was to sacrifice a goat and then take some of its blood into the Most Holy Place of the temple and sprinkle it on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant, thereby making atonement for the people's sins. The blood of the innocent victim thus came between the holy presence of God, understood to be above the Mercy Seat between the outstretched wings of the cherubim, and the broken law of God, which was contained within the Ark. It was a picture of what theologians call substitutionary or vicarious atonement. It is why the day was rightly called the Day of *Atonement.*

The second act involved a live goat. The high priest was to place his hands upon the head of this goat while confessing the sins of the people to God, thereby transferring them to the goat in a symbolic way. Then the goat was to be driven out into the wilderness to die there. This symbolized the bearing away of the nation's sins.

This symbolism was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who made atonement for our sins by his death and also bore them away from us, which was

symbolized by his dying outside the walls of Jerusalem. When Israel rejected Jesus, the people lost what the Day of Atonement stood for. So today, although Jews observe Yom Kippur, it is no longer a true day of atonement, because there is no atonement. There are no sacrifices. Instead, it has become a day merely for confessing one's sin and feeling remorse for it. It has become a ritual rather than a hopeful reality.

Even the Passover has suffered this fate. The central feature of the Passover was the Passover lamb, the blood of which was spread upon the doorposts of the houses of the Jewish people so that the angel of death would pass over them and the firstborn of those homes would not die. The blood of the lamb was an atonement for the people's sin, just as the blood of the goat was an atonement. The Jewish people were as much sinners as the Egyptians. But today, when the Passover is observed by Jews, the day has no atoning significance. Indeed, it has nothing to do with sin or its removal, but only with the memory of the physical deliverance of the people from their earthly bondage.

All this was finalized, as it were, by the destruction of Jerusalem shortly after the time of Jesus and Paul. When the Romans conquered the city in 72 A.D., the temple was destroyed, and it has never been rebuilt. The temple ceremonies ceased with its destruction. In fact, even the nation ceased to exist as a nation, and it is only recently and after nearly two thousand of years of history that a remnant of the people has been regathered in their homeland as the newly reconstructed Israel.

A Resurrected People

That may very well be significant. For although in Paul's day the nation was on the verge of ceasing to be a nation, the regathering of the people in our day may be the beginning of events leading to the resurrection of the people about whom Paul is speaking.

There are three possible ways the phrase "life from the dead" can be taken. It is appropriate to note them here.

1. *A figurative expression.* The words can be no more than a figurative expression, which is how Charles Hodge regards them. "The most common and natural interpretation is that which considers the later clause ['life from the dead'] as merely a figurative expression of a joyful and desirable event. " There is nothing wrong with this, of course. The conversion of the masses of Israel, resulting in additional blessing for the Gentile world, can certainly be described by any phrase that is joyful. But "life from the dead" is such a powerful phrase that it is hard to believe that it does not suggest a great deal more than this.

2. *The final resurrection.* A large number of commentators, both ancient and modern, have thought of the phrase "life from the dead" as referring to the final resurrection, on the grounds that only the resurrection of the dead can be the climactic event of world history. The resurrection and the final judgment to follow it are the climax of world history, of course. But it is questionable whether "life from the dead" can mean this. Leon Morris notes that "life from the dead" nowhere else refers to the resurrection, and the closest equivalent phrase ("alive from the dead," Rom. 6:13, Greek text) refers not to the resurrection, but to the spiritual life of Christians through their mystical union with Jesus Christ.

Besides, Paul is speaking of something that is to occur within history, and the resurrection is not to be thought of as being within history so much as being the termination of it.

Paul's use of the illustration of the olive tree in the verses that follow also suggests this, because it places the breaking off of the Jewish branches, the grafting in of the Gentile branches, and the eventual regrafting of the Jewish branches all on the same plane. Since the first two are within history, the last should be also.

3. *The spiritual regeneration of Israel.* The third interpretation does not exclude interpretation number one, but it sees "life from the dead" as referring also to the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people, which will certainly be necessary if they are to believe on

Jesus as their Messiah and be saved by him. It is a necessity for everyone.

Why did the Jews reject Jesus, after all? It is not sufficient to say that they were "a stiff-necked people," extremely stubborn, although many Jews undoubtedly are, just like many Gentiles. The reason people reject Jesus Christ is because they are dead in their sins, and being spiritually dead, they are unable to understand the extent of their need, comprehend the grace of God in the gospel, or yield their hearts to the Savior. This is what Paul was teaching in the earlier chapters of this letter when he pointed out that

> *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*
>
> *Romans 3:10-11*

It is what he teaches in Ephesians when he writes, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Paul means that apart from a spiritual resurrection, which Jesus called being "born again," no one is able to be good, understand spiritual things, or seek God. On the contrary, we run away from him and make substitute gods to take the true God's place.

"The Resurrection and the Life"

So what is the solution? The solution is obvious. We need to be born again. We need a spiritual resurrection. We need God, because only God is able to give life and provide resurrections. But praise be to God, this is exactly what God does. God is in the resurrection business.

I remind you of the death and resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Jesus had been away from Jerusalem and Bethany preaching in the area of the Jordan River when Lazarus got sick, and although the sick man's sisters immediately sent word to Jesus, Lazarus died and had been in his tomb four days before Jesus got back to Bethany where Lazarus's sisters lived. At first Jesus had private conversations with the two sisters, Martha and later Mary. He told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever

lives and believes in me will never die" (v. 25). It was a declaration that Jesus is able to bring life out of death, both spiritually and physically, the very thing we are talking about.

When Jesus asked where Lazarus had been buried, the sisters, their friends, and the accompanying mourners led him to the tomb. Jesus asked for the stone to be removed. "But, Lord," said Martha, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Jesus replied that she was going to "see the glory of God." He prayed, thanking God that he had heard him and always heard him. Then he addressed the dead man.

"Lazarus, come out!"

The Bible says, in what is surely a great understatement, "The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face" (v. 44).

If this were only the story of a physical resurrection, it would be spectacular enough. We have bodies, and our bodies die. We need physical resurrections if we are to stand before God, see his face, and worship him forever—as we sense we have been destined by God to do. But the deaths of our bodies are not our greatest problem, nor is a physical resurrection our greatest need. We also have dead souls, and we need the resurrection of our souls and spirits if we are to turn to Jesus Christ in living faith and find salvation in him.

Fortunately, the story of Lazarus is also about spiritual resurrections and the promise that spiritual life is to be found in Jesus. He alone can do what needs to be done. He alone can call us from the dark, loathsome charnel house of sin.

And he does. Everyone who has ever come to Christ in saving faith has experienced just such a spiritual resurrection. We were dead in our sins, but we heard Jesus calling, "Lazarus, come out!... John, come out!... Mary, come out!... Robert, come out!..." Whatever our name has been!

And we responded. All who have ever heard that call have responded and have thereby passed out of spiritual death into spiritual life.

Have you? If you have not, I urge you to pay attention to the Bible, the Word of God, because it is through the Bible and its teaching that Jesus calls men and women today. Read it. Allow yourself to be exposed to sound teaching. Meditate on Bible truths.

I believe that if you do that, you will hear Jesus calling and will find that his call is bringing you to new spiritual life.

Resurrection of a Nation

This brings me back to Israel as a nation, for it is Israel we are talking about primarily, and it is the resurrection of that nation that is our chief concern in this passage. We are studying the teaching that the Jews will have a spiritual rebirth in the final days.

I know there are people who consider that impossible, and for a number of reasons. Some reasons are theological, like those I mentioned in the previous study. Some are practical: "How can such a thing happen, considering the fierce opposition the Jews have shown to the gospel through the centuries?" I grant that these are large obstacles on the human level. I cannot even imagine how my sympathetic Gentile neighbor can come to believe in Christ, considering the effects of sin in blinding the human heart, not to mention Jewish people, who have good historical reasons for resenting Christians and resisting evangelism.

But we are not talking on the human level here. We are speaking about God and about resurrections, of which only he is capable. "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Why should the future gathering in of Israel be thought impossible when it is God who is doing the gathering?

New Life Now

Let me add something else as well, even though it is not to be found in our text, strictly speaking. Because God is God of the impossible and of

resurrections, God is also more than adequate for your problems in life right now, whatever they might be.

I have had people tell me that their problems are insolvable. They have been trapped in a sinful sexual relationship that they could not break or an addiction from which they could not free themselves. Is that your story? If it is, let me assure you that it is not impossible for God to solve. If Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead, he can break your destructive habits. He can free you from any sin, however dreadful it may be or however long you may have practiced it. He can release you to serve him.

Other people have told me that a relationship that once meant a great deal to them has died. People often speak this way of a marriage that is going through difficult times. What do you do when love seems to have departed and affection seems to have failed? The world is ready to break off such marriages, of course, claiming that they must have been mistakes. But if this is your situation, I tell you on the authority of the Word of God that this is no course for a Christian. You are to stand against this "easy" escape, and prove by the resurrection of your marriage that God is still the God of miracles.

Do you say it can't happen? Not to you?

Of course, it can happen. Do you think you are a more difficult case than anyone else? You are not. You are like everybody else. And besides, who said it has anything to do with what you are like? We are not talking here about human possibilities. We are speaking about what God can do and will do if you will ask him to do it and determine to obey him, however costly that may be. What is more, if you will do it, you will find that the demonstration of the life-giving power of God in your life will be used by God to draw others to faith, just as many believed on Jesus because of his resurrection of Lazarus.

One of the reasons we have so little true faith today is that we have so few genuine

transformations. Let us do what we can to set that straight. Let us have more "life from the dead" Christianity.

Chapter 162.
Holy to the Lord

Romans 11:16

If I were to ask anyone today what he or she thinks of first when asked to list the characteristics or attributes of God, I am sure that in nearly every case the person I would be speaking to would say "love." Yet that would not have been true for the Old Testament saints. They would have said "holiness." Surprisingly, that is a concept almost never thought about by most people today.

What is more, not only did the Old Testament figures think of holiness when they thought about
God. They also thought of holiness in reference to anything or anybody who had contact with God, for they knew that only what is holy can have contact with him. Holiness dominated their religious ideas. We can see this by the variety of ways the word *holy* is used. R. C. Sproul, in his study of *The Holiness of God*, provides a partial list of items to which the word was applied: holy ground, holy Sabbath, holy convocation, holy nation, holy anointing oil, holy linen coat, holy jubilee, holy house, holy field, holy tithe, holy water, holy censers, holy ark, holy bread, holy city, holy seed, holy word, holy covenant, holy ones, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies.

On top of everything else, God was the thrice-holy God. "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty," called the angels (Isa. 6:3).

Holy Dough and Holy Branches

We need to remember this when we come to Romans 11:16, for Paul is certainly writing within an Old Testament framework when he says, almost casually, "If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy,

then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches."

That strikes us as very strange.

Holy dough? And holy branches? We can understand how God might be thought of as holy, though we probably do not understand what even that means very well. But to speak of things like dough and branches as "holy" seems almost humorous. It is as though Paul were pulling our leg.

He is not, of course. What he is doing is drawing upon an Old Testament understanding of holiness to carry forward the important point he is making in Romans 11, namely, that God has not given up on Israel. It is true that the mass of Israel has been laid aside temporarily in order that by their rejection, salvation might come to the Gentiles. But even in this period of rejection, Israel has not been rejected *utterly;* a remnant is still being saved. Nor will Israel be rejected *finally;* for at the last the masses of Israel will be brought to faith in Jesus Christ, who died for them that they might have forgiveness for their sins.

We need to look at these two images carefully and then apply them to God and his dealings both with Israel and with us.

1. *The dough.* The translation of the first part of verse 16 given to us by the New International
Version is a bit more explicit than Paul himself. Paul does not use the word *dough.* He writes (literally), "If the firstfruit is holy, so also the lump." The emphasis is on "firstfruit," and when we check this concept out in the Old Testament we find it applied to a variety of substances. For example, in Exodus 23:19 it is applied to the first produce of the land, whatever it might be (cf. Deut. 26:1-11). In Exodus 34:22 it is applied to the wheat harvest specifically, and the people are told to present the "firstfruits" in a festival called the Feast of Weeks (cf. Num. 28:26-31) and later at the Feast of Ingathering. Leviticus 2:12, 14 calls the "firstfruits" a grain offering. Leviticus 23 elaborates on the way the offering is to be made. Numbers 15:20-21 describes the offering as a

"cake" made from a portion of ground meal. In Numbers 18:12 the "firstfruits" are olive oil and new wine, as well as grain.

Paul does not specify which of these "firstfruit" offerings he has in mind. But since he ends the sentence with the word *lump,* the New International Version translators are probably right to assume that Paul is thinking of Numbers 15 particularly and so offer the interpretive translation, "If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy."

But we still haven't discovered what this means. We are wondering, "What are the firstfruits? And what does the 'whole batch' represent?"

The only way to understand this image is from the context, of course. But even when we do that there are at least two possibilities. Some writers have identified the "firstfruits" as the first Jewish converts, thus viewing them as a pledge of more converts to come, represented by the "whole batch." That would prepare for the conclusion Paul will reach in verse 26: "And so all Israel will be saved." The trouble is that it would be out of step with the second of the two images Paul uses: that of the root and branches. In that image, the root stands for the patriarchs. It is how Paul himself interprets it in verse 28: "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs."

This parallel suggests that both "firstfruits" in the first illustration and "root" in the second illustration represent Abraham, which is the second of the two possibilities I mentioned. Most commentators hold to this view, among them Charles Hodge, who gives four excellent reasons why the reference must be to Abraham.

2. *The root and the branches.* The second of these two images is not so prominent in the Old Testament, but it is the easier of the two to understand, since Paul develops it himself in this passage. It is what verses 17-24, which follow our text, are all about. In this similitude, the root stands for the patriarchs of Israel (perhaps only Abraham), the natural olive with its many branches stands for the nation of Israel, and

the wild olive tree stands for the Gentile peoples. In Paul's development of the idea, the natural branches, representing individual Jews or successive generations of Jews, are broken off in order that branches from the wild tree, representing individual Gentiles or successive generations of Gentiles, are grafted in. The bottom line of the illustration is that in time God is going to graft the original or natural branches back into their own olive tree.

This brings us to the root meaning of verse 16, of course. For Paul is saying that the patriarchs were "set apart" to God and that this has inescapable consequences for their descendants. To put it in the simplest possible terms: The Jews are a special people because of their descent from Abraham, and this is true of them even in their rebellious and unregenerate state. It means that even yet God has not given up on Israel.

A Holy Nation

Here we have to think about the word *holy.* It is one of the hardest words in the Bible to define. There are several reasons for this. One is that it is a chief, if not *the* chief attribute of God, and we can never understand God as he is in himself completely. It is also difficult because the word is used of people ("Be holy, because I am holy," Lev. 11:44-45; cf. Lev. 19:2; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:16) and of objects. A few of the objects it is linked to were listed earlier. The bottom line of these three applications of the word *holy*—(1) to God, (2) to human beings, and (3) to objects—is that holiness has to do with being "set apart." If you can remember that, you will be able to understand the word in each of these rather diverse applications.

1. *A holy God.* When we speak about God being holy, most people think that this means that God does not sin. Everything he does is right. That is involved in the matter of God being holy, but it is not really what holiness is about. Holiness means that God is "set apart" from us. That is, he is not like us. He is over and above and utterly beyond us, so that we cannot even begin to imagine what he is like except to the extent that he stoops to reveal himself to us.

Theologians have stretched themselves to find terms to express what this means. Germans speak of God being *ganz anders* or "wholly other." English theologians speak of God being transcendent. Rudolf Otto, a German writer, coined a term in Latin, speaking of God as the *mysterium tremendum*, which means an "awe-inspiring mystery."

Let me express this another way. When we speak of God's attributes, we are inclined to list holiness along with such other things as sovereignty, omnipotence, eternity, grace, mercy, love, and so on. But, strictly speaking, holiness does not belong in this catalogue at all, since it describes all that God is and since it qualifies every other attribute. In other words, God is not just sovereign; his is a holy sovereignty. God is not just love; his is a holy love. And so on.

Holiness is what sets God apart from us and renders him awesome to us, who are both finite and sinful.

2. *Holy objects.* How, then, can objects be called holy? At first glance this seems to be utterly impossible, if holiness refers to what God is wholly in himself. But as soon as we remember that holiness describes what is "set apart," the word begins to make sense. Objects become holy when they are "set apart" to God's service rather than to common uses. It is in this way that the Sabbath becomes holy to the Lord. It is a day set apart to God. We desecrate it when we use it for secular ends. In the same way, water, bread, and the temple become holy water, holy bread, and a holy temple when they are set apart for God's service. Each of them becomes holy because of the use to which it is dedicated. In fact, we can speak of holiness as *dedication*, that is, as something "given to God," or even *consecration*, which means "to render sacred (or holy)."

3. *A holy people.* All this brings us to the main point of our study and to the text. For we are speaking here of a holy people, and in its primary sense a holy people is a people "set apart" for God. This is what Israel was and is. The Jews were set apart to God by his

> choice of Abraham. Therefore, because Abraham was set apart, so are his descendants, even to this day. This does not mean that all the descendants of Abraham, all Jews, are saved, of course. Paul has already shown that this is not the case. But it does mean that they remain a people set apart for God's purposes. To put it in other language, God is not finished with Israel yet.

One writer who sees this and develops it well is Robert Haldane. He provides several Old Testament texts to illustrate the principle.

Deuteronomy 7:6. In this chapter, Moses is instructing the people on what they are to do when they enter the Promised Land. They are to destroy the Canaanite peoples and their culture, above all refusing to intermarry with them. Why? "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession."

Deuteronomy 10:15 (with 4:37; 14:2; 26:19; 32:8-9). Israel had been very rebellious against God. Moses reminds the people of it. Nevertheless, he says, "The LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today."

Exodus 2:24. The people were slaves in Egypt and cried out under their harsh bondage. "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with
Jacob."

Deuteronomy 4:31. This chapter foresees a day in which the people would fall into idolatry, forsaking the God who had loved them, delivered them from Egypt, and brought them into their land. It promises that in spite of their sin, if they would call out to God in their distress, God would hear them and deliver them. "For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath."

Isaiah 43:21. "... my chosen, the people I have formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise."

1 Samuel 12:22. After Israel had asked for an earthly king and was given one, Samuel rebuked them for their sin. Nevertheless, he added, "For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own."

It would be possible to add scores of additional verses like these, all showing that for the sake of the patriarchs the people of Israel had a special relationship to God, even when they sinned, and that God would not abandon them. Did they suffer for their sin? Of course! Were all Jews saved? Of course not! Nevertheless, many were, and down through the course of history the purposes of God for his people continued unchanged and in the end will result in their national conversion. Haldane concludes rightly, "As the lump is holy through the offering of the firstfruit and as the tree derives its character from the root, so the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whom the Lord chose, were set apart by solemn covenant for his service and glory."

Holy "On That Day"

I have spoken several times of the Jews as being holy to God in spite of how they lived, that is, as holy even in Israel's rebellion, since they remain God's special people and fulfill God's purposes even in that state. One of those purposes is the salvation of the Gentiles now being accomplished through their rejection, as we have seen. Yet I recognize that it is possible to gain a wrong impression from what I have said about being holy "even in rebellion" and to assume that God does not care how we live. Or, to put it in other words, to suppose that we can be saved without holiness. I want to correct that now, since we must always remember that "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

To make this point, let me take you to the end of the Book of Zechariah. I go to Zechariah for three reasons. First, Zechariah is a postexilic prophet. That is, he wrote after the return of the Jews from their exile to Babylon. This is important, because there are people who suppose that all the promises of God to the Jews were fulfilled either in the days of Solomon (when they enjoyed the fullest extent of their territorial

possessions), in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (when they were regathered from many places to which they had been scattered), or by the coming of Jesus Christ (when the types and symbols of their earthly worship were fulfilled spiritually in him). But Zechariah lived after the exile and was looking forward to blessing for Israel in days that were (and are) clearly still to come.

Second, Zechariah envisions a specific great day of national blessing, which he refers to repeatedly in the last chapters of his prophecy by the words "on that day." The phrase occurs sixteen times (Zech. 12:3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11; 13:1, 2, 4; 14:4, 6, 8, 9, 13, 20, 21), and there are other similar terms in addition. This seems to refer to the day (or days) of the final consummation of all things, for it includes judgment upon the Gentile nations as well as forgiveness, restoration, and spiritual blessing for Israel.

The third reason I refer to Zechariah is that the prophet ends on the exact note we have been studying: holiness. In fact, it is he who uses the phrase "holy to the Lord," which I have taken as the title for this study.

Here is how he writes: "On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD'S house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty" (Zech. 14:20-21).

What is Zechariah getting at? Why holy bells? And holy cooking pots? The answer, of course, is that Zechariah is looking ahead to the same day Paul is anticipating in Romans 11, when the Jews as a nation will be brought to God and will be forgiven for their sin and purified from it. In that day there will be no mixture, a remnant saved and the larger portion lost. Nor will the people be saved and yet remain in sin. They will be a thoroughly purified people, so much so that everything associated with them will be holy, even the bells on their horses and the

pots on their stoves. They will be set apart to God to such a degree that everything they have or touch will be dedicated to him.

And there is another interesting point. In the paragraph immediately before this, Zechariah describes the revitalized people going to Jerusalem to worship God by celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (or Ingathering). This was a feast at which the "firstfruits" were offered. But the reason for the reference at this point in Zechariah is that the Feast of Tabernacles was the *final* harvest festival, when the whole year's crop was gathered in. We can hardly miss the symbolism. It is the day when the crop of Israel will be gathered to God, when Israel as a nation will be "holy to the Lord" (Zech. 14:20), when "Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26).

Our Common Destiny: Holiness

As I began this study I said that in the end I wanted to apply it to ourselves as well as to Israel as a nation, and I want to do that now in closing. The point is that this is also our destiny as Christians. We, too, are to be "holy to the Lord." And if that is the case, if that is what we will surely be one day—since "without holiness no one will see the Lord"—we must strive to be holy now.

Here is how I applied this in my earlier study of the Minor Prophets. Have you ever thought of your destiny in terms of holiness? If you are a Christian, you have been set apart to God to be wholly his. But you are not holy now. You are sinful now, and the more you live, the more you will be aware of it. Your *destiny* is holiness. That is why we read about this so often in the Bible. God told the people through Moses, "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45; cf. 19:2; 20:7). And Peter picks up on the theme, writing, "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). This is not only a command. It is our sure end. If we belong to Jesus Christ, God, whose purposes do not change, will make us like him in holiness one day.

We usually think of salvation relationally today. That is why, as I said at the beginning of this study, we think of God's attributes as being, first of all, love, then perhaps mercy, kindness, goodness, and such things. This is not wrong, of course. God is love, and we are being enabled to love him and others because he first loved us and so showed us what love is like.

But this is not the way the Bible speaks of our destiny. It is not the love relationship that is emphasized. We are not told that we will spend our time in heaven loving God and others, though we undoubtedly will. The Bible emphasizes holiness. And the reason it does is that a lack of holiness is what accounts for our inability to love rightly and, in fact, to do anything else well. The reason our relationships to God are not all they should be is that we are not holy. The reason why our relationships to others are not all they should be is that we are not holy. We need to be holy.

But, praise God, one day we shall be holy. "We shall be like [Jesus], for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

So why not be holy now? That is what John concludes. For immediately after telling us that we will be like Jesus one day, he says, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (v. 3). Do you? You will, if you have your eyes fixed on that great destiny.

Chapter 163.
Root, Shoot, and Branches

Romans 11:17-24

If there is any one thing that illustrations are supposed to accomplish, it is that they are to make what is being taught clear. Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher who was exceptionally good at illustrations, called them "windows that let in light."

The interesting thing about the Bible's illustrations is that they do not always do that. In fact, they sometimes seem to do the opposite. Think

of Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23). After Jesus had described to the masses of his listeners the four kinds of soil and the four results of the farmer's sowing, the disciples, who did not understand him, asked what the story meant and why he was speaking in parables. Surprisingly, Jesus replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.... This is why I speak to them in parables..." (vv. 11, 13). He was saying that the purpose of his story was to obscure, rather than make the teaching plain.

A Difficult Illustration

The apostle Paul was *not* trying to be obscure when he introduced in Romans 11 the illustration of the olive tree with its rejected and newly grafted branches. He was trying to be clear. Nevertheless, the illustration seems to have been unusually difficult for subsequent readers of this letter. I gave what I considered to be the obvious meaning of the metaphor in the last study—the "root" is Abraham, the branches that have been "broken off are subsequent generations of unbelieving Jews, the branches that have been "grafted in" are believing Gentiles. But not everyone thinks it is that clear. One commentator remarked that he uncovered at least a half-dozen different interpretations in the course of his preparation of these verses.

In my opinion these difficulties stem largely from the most common of all errors in studying parables or illustrations. That is, to press them beyond the simple, single point of the illustration. Sometimes people do that by overly stressing the illustration's details. At other times they treat the stories too literally.

Let me show what I think has happened here. I think the chief problems with the treatment of the illustration of the olive tree comes from treating it as concerned with individuals alone, on the one hand, or with nations, on the other. What happens if you think of the broken off branches in terms of individuals? Obviously, you have introduced the thought that a person's salvation can be lost. That allows us to warn against presumption, which we must do in any case. Our next study will do exactly that. But the idea that salvation can be lost runs counter to

Paul's explicit teaching in Romans 8, in which he stressed that nothing in all creation will ever "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

Even worse, if that is the view we take, there is no purpose to Romans 9-11. For the only reason for Paul to be writing these chapters is to answer the objection that we cannot believe in eternal security if Israel is lost, since in that case God would not have been faithful to them.

But suppose we treat the illustration as having to do with nations? In that case, the nation of Israel is replaced by Gentile *nations,* and we find ourselves beginning to think about some kind of Gentile supremacy. The commentator I mentioned earlier, the one who discovered at least six different interpretations of the illustration of the olive tree, did just that. For in his detailed treatment of Romans 11, the chapter that follows his study of the olive tree is entitled "Gentile Domination."

These difficulties can be eliminated if we realize that Paul is not talking about either individuals or nations specifically, but only about the masses of Jews and many Gentiles. His point is that most Jews have not believed on Jesus Christ and are therefore cut off from the spiritual blessings that should belong to them because of their being Jews, while many Gentiles, who have no claim upon the spiritual blessings granted Israel, have nevertheless entered into those blessings by faith in the Jews' Messiah.

As far as the covenant of God with Israel is concerned, Paul says that it is being fulfilled, though not with every individual Jewish person. Those whom God has elected to salvation are being saved, both Jews and Gentiles, and in the end there will be a time of repentance and spiritual blessing for Israel nationally.

An "Unnatural" Illustration

In the case of this illustration there is also another problem that we have to deal with, namely, that the grafting process Paul describes seems to be unnatural. Wild shoots are not usually grafted onto cultivated roots,

as Paul describes. Rather it is the other way around. William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam say rightly, in their well-known commentary, "Grafts must necessarily be of branches from a cultivated olive inserted into a wild stock, the reverse process being one which would be valueless and is never performed."

Paul's "error" has led some commentators, like C. H. Dodd, to make smug remarks about the apostle's supposed ignorance. Dodd wrote, "Paul had the limitations of a town-bred man.... He had not the curiosity to inquire what went on in the olive-yards which fringed every road he walked."

Well, the process may not have been as impossible as all that, and Paul may not be writing in ignorance. Some years ago, William Ramsay, one of the great students of the apostle Paul's teaching and travels, did a study of "The Olive-Tree and the Wild-Olive," in which he produced what seems to be ancient confirmations of what Paul described. According to Ramsay, the Roman writer Columella said that "when an Olive-tree produces badly, a slip of Wild-Olive is grafted on it, and this gives new vigor to the tree" (*Res Rustica*, V, 9, 16). Similarly, Palladius wrote that "the Wild-Olive graft invigorated the tree on which it was set" (*Opus Agriculturae,* XI, 8, 3). Ramsay referred to the renowned Mediterranean fruit-tree botanist Theobald Fisher as saying that the process described by Paul "is still in use in exceptional circumstances at the present day."

However, there is a problem with Ramsay's solution, too. According to Ramsay, the purpose of grafting in the wild shoot is to invigorate the old tree or root. But, according to Paul's use of the illustration, the Gentiles, who are represented by the wild olive shoots, bring nothing to the fusion. Ramsay's solution, while it may be true horticulturally and may excuse Paul from the charge of ignorance, actually confuses the issue.

In my opinion, the real explanation is in a phrase Paul himself uses in verse 24, when he speaks of the Gentiles being grafted into a cultivated olive tree as "contrary to nature." If this is to be taken at face value, it

means that Paul was fully aware that what he was describing—the grafting of a wild shoot into a cultivated stock—was unnatural. But that is precisely his point. It was utterly unnatural that God should work in this manner to save Gentiles. Yet it is what God has done. Salvation is of grace. However, if God did the unnatural thing in saving Gentiles, how much more should we expect him to do the natural thing eventually and thus bring about the future widespread belief of Israel in their own Messiah?

An Instructive Illustration

But enough analysis! What is the point of this substantial biblical illustration (eight verses)? What are its lessons? I see seven of them.

1. *There is only one people of God.* This is an obvious point of the olive-tree illustration, but surprisingly it is often completely overlooked, particularly by those who, like myself, believe that Romans 11 is prophesying a future day of Jewish blessing. A large number of those who do this are dispensationalists who tend to locate the widespread conversion of Israel in a future age and describe it in terms that give the Jews an identity and destiny quite different from the church. I believe in Israel's future conversion, because I believe that Romans 11 and other passages teach it. But the opponents of dispensationalism are right when they insist that there are not two peoples of God with two destinies but one only.

In this letter, Abraham has been presented as the father of all who are saved, since they are saved by faith, as he was. He is the root of the tree. Therefore, all who are saved, whether Jews or Gentiles, are saved only by believing God, as he did, and are thus part of the one olive tree.

Moreover, when Paul speaks of the future day of Jewish conversion, he is not speaking of something outside of or beyond history, nor of a dispensation yet to come. This is within history. It is within the very flow of events that we ourselves know that Gentiles and eventually Jews will all believe in Christ and the entire company of God's elect will be made up.

2. *The people of God must (and will) bear fruit.* Paul does not speak of fruit-bearing specifically in these verses. But that is the whole point of grafting: to produce a more fruitful tree. Besides, although Paul does not speak of fruit by that term, this is certainly what he has in mind when he writes of unbelieving Jews being broken off "because of unbelief and of believing Gentiles being grafted into the Jewish tree "by faith" (v. 20). Unbelief is the ultimate expression of fruitlessness, and faith is the first of all fruits.

I observed in the previous study that the olive tree is not a prominent image in the Old
Testament, especially in regard to Israel. Nevertheless, it is used of Israel in two passages: Jeremiah 11:16 and Hosea 14:6. They have nothing to do with wild branches being grafted into the old stock. But they do have to do with fruitfulness. Jeremiah 11:16 reads:

> *The LORD called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form.*
> *But with the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire, and its branches will be broken.*

Why is the tree to be destroyed by fire and its branches broken? The next verse explains that it is "because the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done evil." That is, they were not fruitful. They were not believing. It is possible that Paul got the idea for his more elaborate illustration in Romans from this passage.

And perhaps from Hosea 14:6, too, the only other verse that applies the olive-tree illustration to the Jewish nation. I say this because, like Romans 11, this verse looks forward to a future day of blessing for Israel, saying, "His [Israel's] splendor will be like an olive tree, / his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon."

The point, of course, is that God requires fruitfulness in his people. In fact, without fruitfulness they are not his people. This is what Jesus taught in the discourse recorded in John 15, though with the illustration of a vine and its branches rather than an olive tree and its branches. He said, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off

every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes [trims clean] so that it will be even more fruitful.... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:1-2, 5, 8). The vine illustration is prominent in the Old Testament (see Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7).

3. *Gentiles contribute nothing to the salvation process.* This is the point at which I found William Ramsay's material to be unhelpful and even misleading. For although the point of grafting is to bring the strength and fruitfulness of the shoot to enrich the old tree, in Paul's illustration it is entirely the reverse. The engrafted branches are the Gentiles, and the thrust of his words to them is that they are not to boast over the cut-off branches, as if they were valuable themselves. Instead, we who are Gentiles are to bear in mind that we "do not support the root, but the root supports you [us]" (v. 18).

We stand, but our standing is by faith alone, and that means that we stand only by grace. We have no inherent claim to anything.

It follows, too, that there is no "good" in Gentile religion. People today think in terms of all religions bringing their little bit of truth to the whole, each one adding its part, but this is utterly at odds with Paul's illustration. Asians do not contribute their little bit of yin and yang. Africans do not contribute their little bit of superstition from their tribal religions. Indians do not contribute their little bit of folk wisdom or dances. Americans do not contribute their democracy or capitalism. According to Paul's illustration, Gentiles are a "wild olive" (v. 17), one of the most worthless of all trees.

And let's not overlook the word *wild.* Apart from the grace of the gospel in Jesus Christ, all we have are our wild ways. And they are destructive ways, too. The only true way is the way of faith in Christ that has come to us through Judaism.

Do you remember what Jesus told the Samaritan woman? She wanted to engage him in debate over which of the two religious traditions she was acquainted with was best, the religion of the Samaritans or the Jews. "I can see you are a prophet," she said when Christ told her she was living in sin. "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:19-20).

Jesus answered that although a time was coming when the place of worship would be irrelevant ("Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem"), nevertheless, this did not mean that the religions of the Samaritans and Jews were equal—"You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews" (vv. 21-22).

The only true religion is the revealed religion, which God has given to us through the channel of Judaism. Not all Jews are saved, of course. Paul is saying that clearly. Nevertheless, he is also saying clearly that Jews are not saved by becoming Gentiles; rather Gentiles (as well as Jews) are saved by becoming true Jews. That is, all who are saved are and must be the true spiritual children of Abraham.

4. *Neither do Jews.* I have said that Gentiles contribute nothing to the salvation process. But now we have to add that neither do Jews. Is that contradictory? Didn't I just quote Jesus as saying that "salvation is from the Jews"? Yes, but that is quite different from saying "salvation is being
Jewish."

The word *from* implies a channel. It means that the way of salvation has been made known through the revelation given to Israel, through its kings and prophets, above all through Jesus Christ. Jews become beneficiaries of that revelation, not by being Jews or by bringing any innate measure of spiritual understanding or intrinsic righteousness to God. They benefit only and in exactly the same way Gentiles do, which is by believing on Jesus. "They were broken off because of unbelief," Paul says—"And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted

in, for God is able to graft them in again" (vv. 20, 23). He could hardly make his point clearer.

Weren't those broken-off branches in the Jewish tree called "holy," in Paul's original use of the root and branches illustration? In what sense, then, were the branches holy? The answer, as we saw in the previous study, is that they were "set apart" to God's purposes. What were those purposes? They were that the Jews might be:

The receivers of the law, the prophets, and the writings. That is, we received our Bibles through Judaism.

The preservers of these for the world. We would not have our Bibles, especially not our Old Testaments, had not Jewish scribes faithfully and meticulously preserved these ancient documents for us.

The earthly line of the Messiah. Jesus was a descendent of Abraham through the tribe of Judah. He was a descendant of King David.

God's witnesses to these truths. All the early preachers, including Paul himself, were Jews. Without their faithful witness to these truths, none of us would have known of Jesus, understood the gospel, or believed.

5. *Do not boast.* The fifth application of the truths embodied in the illustration of the olive tree is the one Paul himself emphasizes. At this point of the letter he is writing to Gentiles specifically, as he says in verse 13, and the burden of his words is that they dare not boast over the Jews because of their present favored position. It is true that Jewish branches were broken off so that, in God's providence, the gospel might come to Gentiles. Their rejection has been a source of Gentile blessing. But Gentiles are not to boast, since they stand only by faith and will themselves be broken off if they do not continue in it.

We must not forget the warnings throughout the Bible about boasting. If we boast, we are not believing. For boasting is being proud of our own (supposed) achievements, and believing is receiving what God in Jesus Christ has done for us.

6. *Do not presume on God's favor.* The sixth application follows closely on the warning not to boast. For when we boast we are presuming on God's favor, and that is fatal. Presuming means assuming that everything is right between ourselves and God, regardless of what we may believe or not believe or of how we may act. The only way we can avoid presumption is to obey God and pursue righteousness diligently. As I have often said, if we are not following after Jesus Christ in faithful discipleship, we are not disciples. And if we are not disciples of Christ, we are not Christians.

7. *Fear (respect) God.* Finally, fear God (vv. 20, 22). This does not mean that we are to cower before God if we are Christians. It has to do with respect. Still it is nevertheless a holy, awesome respect we are to have—awe before both God's kindness and severity. This is reminding us that God is not mocked. Sin will be punished, and unbelief does exclude us from the good tree of salvation, whoever we may be. We need to consider that there is indeed only one people of God and that entry into that one people is by true faith in Jesus in all cases.

Chapter 164.
A Warning to the Gentile Churches

Romans 11:17-22

In Romans 11, Paul is writing about the future of the Jews as a people. So it is surprising how much of what he says in this chapter is to Gentiles. He began by addressing them directly in verse 13 ("I am talking to you Gentiles"), and he continues speaking to them exclusively until verse 25, where he begins to address a broader group of people again. In verses 17-22, he warns the Gentiles not to boast over Judaism because of the Gentiles' current favored status, saying that if the Jews, who were God's especially chosen people once, have been

rejected at least temporarily because of unbelief, the Gentiles also will be rejected if they follow their bad example.

This is a serious warning, one that we must take to heart.

Prosperity seems always to lead to some kind of boasting, and this is true of spiritual prosperity as well as of material prosperity. When we go through hard times, we usually sense our inadequacy and draw close to God, calling on him for help. But as soon as things go well for us, we find it easy to think that it is because of who we are or what we have done and not because of God's unmerited grace and blessing. Then we cease to trust God; we drift away from him and fall into sin. It was an awareness of this ever-present danger that caused Paul to write forcefully to the Christians at Corinth, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10:12).

As Paul writes to those of us who are Gentiles, he is aware that our present position might cause us to boast over the Jews who held a privileged position before us. But he warns us not to boast. Rather, fear God, he says. We may be standing now, but we stand only by grace. If we cease to stand in grace by believing God, we, too, will fall.

Does that mean that salvation can be lost? No. Paul has been teaching the doctrine of perseverance. But what he says here is nevertheless a strong warning against spiritual presumption. John Calvin believed in eternal security, but he wrote, "We should never think of the rejection of the Jews without being struck with dread and terror."

The Fall of National Churches

What Paul tells us in these verses is that if the Gentiles fail to stand by faith, they will be cut off, just as the Jews were. So I begin by saying that this has happened to churches in large sectors of the world. At one time these places had thriving churches. But no longer. Today that earlier witness has been radically reduced and in some cases nearly eradicated.

1. *The church in Asia Minor.* I start with Asia Minor, what we today call Turkey. This was the first major area of the ancient Gentile world to be evangelized, largely because of Paul's missionary travels. Thanks to his efforts, churches were planted in Derbe, Iconium, Lystra, and Ephesus, among others, and the gospel spread from Ephesus to such surrounding cities as Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, which are mentioned in the early chapters of Revelation. By the year 113, about sixty years after Paul's work, Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, complained to the emperor Trajan that the new faith was affecting the older worship patterns. People were neglecting the ancient gods, and the temple revenues had fallen off. Irenaeus, one of the first great Christian writers (*c.* 130-c. 200), was from Smyrna. The great fourth-century defenders of Nicene orthodoxy, Basil of Caesaria, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, were from Cappadocia.

Yet where is the church of Asia Minor today? Its early vitality faded, its gospel became mere moralism, and the Moslem invasions of the early Middle Ages overwhelmed it and almost entirely snuffed it out. Today Turkey is an almost-virgin mission field for Christianity.

2. *The church in North Africa.* There is an almost identical pattern for North Africa. Tertullian (*c.* 155-c. 220), the first great Christian apologist, was from Carthage on the north African coast. Cyprian (*c.* 220-258), who was born about the time Tertullian died, was his predecessor's intellectual heir, and in time he became bishop of the city. There was a major center of the African church at Alexandria, further to the east. It produced such outstanding leaders as Clement (*c.* 150—*c.* 215) and Origen (*c.* 185—*c.* 254). The great defender of Christ's deity during the years of the Arian controversy, Athanasius (*c.* 295-373), was likewise from Alexandria. Most impressive of all, Saint Augustine (354-430), the greatest theologian of the early church, was born in Tagastein, northern Africa and later became the celebrated bishop of Hippo, also on the African continent.

Under such leadership, Christianity thrived in North Africa for several centuries. But, again, it lost its vitality, faded, and was eventually replaced by Islam. Moslems took possession of Jerusalem in 638 and then conquered most of Asia Minor from 1071 onward. In spite of the energetic and repeated efforts of the Crusaders, the last Crusader conquest in Palestine was surrendered in 1291, and Constantinople in Asia Minor fell in 1453.

3. *The church in Italy.* To the north and west, in Italy, the early church was subjected to many years of persecution by the weakened Roman Empire, but it eventually seemed to have triumphed for good as the result of the celebrated conversion of the emperor Constantine on the eve of his battle against the armies of Maxentius on October 28, 312. Constantine claimed to have received a vision the night before the battle in which he saw the Christ symbol (the Greek letter "x" with the character for "r" through the center of it, the first two letters of the Greek word for "Christ") accompanied by the words "In this sign conquer." He had the sign painted on his helmet and the shields of his soldiers, marched into battle, and was victorious.

The final phase of the state's persecution of the church was now ended, and the church was given preferred legal status. Constantine himself presided over the great Council of Nicaea in 325. Ironically, prosperity turned out to be more harmful to the church than persecution. The religious hierarchy became even more corrupt than that of the declining empire. By the late Middle Ages, the western church was selling salvation through the system of indulgences, which appalled Martin Luther, provoked the posting of his Ninety-five Theses in 1517, and sparked the Reformation.

If ever a church had its candlestick removed by Jesus, while nevertheless retaining the outward appearances of influence and prosperity, it was the Roman church of the Middle Ages. The church had apparently triumphed, but wise observers saw it as nothing more than an evil, powerful, and secularized institution.

Calvin must have been thinking of the slide of the early church into the corruption of the Middle Ages when he wrote, referring to our passage in Romans, "The fearful defection of the whole of the world which afterwards took place gives clear evidence of how necessary this admonition was. When God had watered the whole of the world with his grace in but a moment, so that religion flourished universally, the truth of the gospel shortly afterwards vanished, and the treasure of salvation was taken away. The only explanation of so sudden a change is that the Gentiles fell away from their calling."

4. *The church of the Reformation in Europe.* Heirs of the Reformation tend to boast over Roman Catholicism at this point, praising Martin Luther and the other sixteenth-century Reformers. But we must remember that the same decline overtook the Reformation churches. Once a dominant influence in Germany, Switzerland, France, and Holland, the Reformation churches soon forgot the true gospel, grew weak internally, and are now attended by only a small minority of people. Less than 4 percent of Europeans attend church, even on religious holidays.

5. *The church in England and the West.* And what of the church in England and the West? What of the church in the United States? In England attendance at church is only marginally better than on the European continent. England, like Europe, is a great mission field. And who does not sense that churches in the United States, though attended by substantially large numbers of people at the moment, are nevertheless declining? Who would say that the present influence of Christianity on our cultural value system is as great today as it was even a decade ago, not to mention during the early years of our country's history?

The Fall of Particular Churches

What has happened on a national level happens in individual churches too. One of the saddest things I know is the decline of a once-vital church.

I think of the church in which I was ordained. Formerly a bastion of orthodoxy, it has been weakened through a series of ineffective pastorates. Its current pastor, who is neo-orthodox (Barthian) in theology, was not chosen by the pastoral seeking committee for his orthodoxy.

Although the members of the pastoral search knew he had departed from a high view of Scripture as God's inerrant Word and from the orthodoxy that had characterized most of his predecessors, this man was chosen because the committee felt they needed an "orator" if the church was to survive. It is not surviving, of course. The evening service has gone, and the impact this church once had in the great city in which it is located has evaporated.

What does Paul say in our text? "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either."

It bears repeating that he told the Corinthians, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Can such a thing happen to a conservative, Bible-based church? Of course, it can. It will happen if we do not continue strong in the faith once delivered to the saints. We stand by grace through faith. But if we forget that it is by grace that we stand or that we must continue in faith, believing what God teaches in the Bible, then we will fall—as surely as those formerly thriving churches that have preceded us on the stage of world history.

The Fall of Individuals

I intend to turn to what Paul tells us to remember, since it is his solution to the problem I have been describing. Before I do, I will extend the warning one step further by applying it to individuals who suppose they are Christians because they are part of a Christian church and affirm the right things, but who are not actually anchored in the grace of God and are not exercising that true faith in God that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit within them.

Let me warn you that it is fatally easy to assume that all is well with your soul when actually you are perishing. In fact, in your unbelieving

state it is the most natural thing in the world, because you do not perceive what is really spiritual and suppose that the externals of Christianity are what matters.

If you have any sensitivity to spiritual things, you must ask yourself, "Has my commitment to Christ made any discernible difference in my life?" In other words, is there anything you are doing now that you would not be doing if you were not a Christian? Is there anything you are *not* doing because you know it would displease Jesus Christ? Are you obeying his commandments? Do you love to be with other Christians?

Are you studying the Bible? And when you study it can you really say that you hear God speaking to you in its pages? Do you recognize what you read there to be the truth? Do you change what you are doing as a result? Are you trying to order your life according to the Bible's teaching and redirect it according to right Christian priorities?

This is what it means to "make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10), in sharp contrast to what Jesus was warning of when he described sowing seed on ground where it seemed to grow well but soon dried up for lack of depth, was choked by weeds, or was snatched away by Satan (Matt. 13:1-9).

I have already mentioned John Calvin and the fact that he is strong on the doctrine of eternal security or perseverance. But listen to what he says to individuals who consider themselves Christians but who may nevertheless be presuming on the grace of God: "It is not enough to have embraced only once the grace of God, unless during the whole course of your life you follow his call. Those who have been enlightened by the Lord must always turn their minds to perseverance."

Four Things to Remember

How do we "stand by faith" (Rom. 11:20)? Paul gives the answer in verse 22. According to Robert Haldane, there are four things Paul tells the Gentiles to remember.

1. He urges them to behold *"the severity of God's strict justice in cutting off and casting out the unbelieving Jews."* We tend to treat God as a benevolent old man who will never do anything as harsh as judge anyone. We are especially prone to this if we are only cultural Christians and not truly regenerate. We need to disabuse ourselves of such fantasies. God is love, but he is also a God of strict justice. His rejection of the Jews should be a warning to us never to presume on his goodness but, rather, always to strive to make certain we are truly saved.

2. He reminds them of God's *"goodness in conferring unmerited favor on the Gentiles."* They attained a righteousness they were not even seeking. The emphasis here is on God's unmerited favor, for it takes away all grounds for boasting or presumption. If there is nothing in us that has brought us to Christ, there is obviously nothing in us that keeps us there either. We dare not presume. We stand by grace only.

3. He stresses *"the necessity of [their] continuing in that goodness, by abiding in the faith of the Gospel.*" Nothing but faith will enable the believer to stand in grace. Therefore, we must cultivate faith. How? Paul has already given us the answer: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Faith comes by studying the Bible and by hearing it taught and preached. That is why we must continue to go to church to hear sound teaching and why we must study the Bible privately as well. If we do not, we will drift away. And if we drift away without returning eventually—and how can we be sure we will return?—we will perish.

I repeat: Nothing but faith will enable the believer to stand in grace. But I also add now: Nothing but unbelief keeps anyone from grace. No one needs to perish. Paul also wrote, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are

justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.... 'Anyone who trust in him will never be put to shame'" (Rom. 10:9-11).

4. He warns them that *"if they abide not in the faith, they should be themselves cut off."* So do not presume! We start with faith, but we must also end with faith. If we do not, we shall be cut off, as Israel was.

"Lest We Forget"

In the summer of 1897, the British Empire held a great celebration to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the accession to the throne of Queen Victoria. She had become the British monarch on June 20, 1837, and there had been a fiftieth-year Jubilee in 1887. This follow-up celebration a decade later was the high point of the Victorian era and the zenith of British power and influence. Prime ministers, judges, statesmen, and other highly placed representatives assembled from every part of the worldwide empire. Hundreds of the great ships of the massed British Navy clogged the Thames. It was unlike anything the world would ever see again.

But at last the festivities were over. The statesmen and the ships departed, and Rudyard Kipling, the outstanding British poet of the Victorian period, had written "Recessional," a reminder of man's impermanent grandeur:

God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,

Beneath whose awful hand we hold Dominion over palm and pine
— Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget—lest we forget!
The tumult and the shouting dies; The captains and the kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice, An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget—lest we forget!
Far-called, our navies melt away; On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!
If drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law— Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget—lest we forget!
For heathen heart that puts her trust In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard, For frantic boast and foolish word— Thy Mercy on Thy People, Lord!

Kipling was writing of the British Empire, of course. But his words speak equally to churches and to individuals who foolishly boast of their own attainments or coast along in their present favored standing without pausing to remember the grace of God that brought them to that place and the obligation they have to stand together as Christians in grace by faith alone. So do not forget! Stand in your high calling! Stand by faith! Greater individuals than you and I have perished. Nations as powerful as ours have been overthrown. And stronger churches than ours have fallen to the severity of God's just judgments in history.

Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

Chapter 165.

A Future for God's Ancient People

Romans 11:23-24

It is not going too far out on a limb to suggest that few of today's Christians have mastered the great prophecy of Ezekiel. Not many could give an outline of that book. Most could not tell even a single thing that is in it. Yet there is a story in Ezekiel 37 that most of us are aware of. It is the story of Ezekiel's preaching in the valley of dry bones, which is acknowledged in the chorus of a Negro spiritual: "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones! / Now hear the word of the Lord."

God brought the prophet to a valley full of dry bones and told him to preach to them. When Ezekiel did as God commanded, the bones began to come together to form complete human skeletons. Tendons, flesh, and skin appeared on them. At last, as Ezekiel continued to preach, breath entered the bones and "they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army" (Ezek. 37:10).

God explained the lesson, saying, "These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land...'" (vv. 11-14).

The story is relevant to Paul's teaching in Romans 11, of course. He is writing about Israel, saying that the Jewish people will become believers in Jesus Christ in the last days. Yet, based on our observance, nothing is more improbable than such a conversion, or even the image Paul is using.

He has spoken of a cultivated olive tree whose branches were broken off and of a wild olive tree whose branches were grafted into the cultivated stock. That illustration pictures the inclusion of the Gentiles in Israel's spiritual blessings. But, then, in what is surely an impossible

situation in terms of horticulture, Paul begins to speak of the broken and discarded branches being grafted back into *their own* olive tree. Branches once broken off a tree die and cannot be regrafted. True enough. But we are not speaking here about things that are merely possible or impossible in nature. We are speaking of God, and with God all things are possible.

Robert Haldane says wisely, "What is not done in nature, and cannot be effected by the power of man, will be done by God, with whom all things are possible. He is able to make the dry bones live, and to restore the severed branches of the Jewish nation."

In the preceding verses (vv. 20-22), Gentiles are warned that, unless they stand in faith, they will be cut off. Verses 23-24 are the reverse of that, telling the Jews that if they "do not persist in unbelief but rather believe in Jesus, they will be brought back in.

Two Explanations

Until now, my interpretation of Romans 11 has been following what seems to me to be the general meaning and flow of the chapter. However, most people are aware—you may be one— that there is a sharp debate over the true meaning of these verses, and this is the place both to acknowledge this debate and deal with it. There are two main explanations, though they have numerous modifications.

1. *A present explanation.* The first interpretation rejects any futuristic references in Paul's teaching about the Jews and sees these verses as describing only what we already observe in regard to the general pattern of Jewish unbelief coupled with the salvation of some Jews. According to this view, Paul would be teaching that the hardening of the Jews is not so great as to prevent some being converted and entering the Christian church, just as Gentiles do, and that this will continue to the end of the present age of gospel grace.

2. *A future explanation.* The second interpretation sees Paul looking ahead to a future moment in God's dealings with Israel in which there will be a great and general conversion of Jews in fulfillment of ancient but as yet unfulfilled prophecies. This will take place when the salvation of all the Gentiles who are to be saved (but who are not yet saved) shall have been accomplished.

Charles Hodge has a helpful discussion of these two possibilities, showing that the first was developed largely during the Reformation period as the result of two things: first, the extravagant prophetic views of the Millennarians, which the Reformers rejected; and, second, what Hodge freely admits was the Reformers' prejudice against the Jews. Sadly, we must admit that Hodge is right in this. The Jews were the despised people of the late Middle Ages, and the Reformers, Luther especially, did not rise above this unjustified hatred. To illustrate his point, Hodge cites a particularly offensive passage from Luther, which he wisely leaves in German, saying that it "does not admit of translation."

The Present Explanation

Arguments for the first of these explanations can be found in various places, particularly among present-day Reformed people who draw their theology from the sixteenth-century Reformers. I would like to focus on one excellent example. It is a study entitled "A Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans Eleven?" by O. Palmer Robertson, who wrote the paper when he was an associate professor of Old Testament theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. He then became pastor of a church north of Washington, D.C. Robertson makes the following points:

1. *Much (if not all) of Romans 11 is dealing with God's purposes for the Jews in the present age.* Robertson discusses verses 1, 5, 13-14, and 30-31 especially, showing rightly that they are speaking about the salvation of some Jews at the present time, a remnant. Paul is an example, and so are those few who responded or will have responded to his teaching and to that of the other ministers of the

gospel. Robertson concludes, "These references do not exclude by necessity parallel references to some future purpose of God with Israel. They do, however, warn the exegete against assuming too hastily that the entirety of chapter eleven of Romans deals with Israel's distinctive future." There can be no quarrel with this analysis.

2. *Verses assumed to speak of God's distinct dealings with Israel in the future do not necessarily do so.* Here Robertson discusses verses 1, 5, 12, 15, 17-24, and 25-26a, the critical discussion being of verse 25, which speaks of Israel being hardened *"until* the full number of the Gentiles has come in." Robertson concludes that "until" does not refer to a termination of something after which something else will happen, but to a final termination of everything (*a terminus ad quem* rather than a *terminus a quo*). He calls this an eschatological termination. That is, it concerns the return of Christ and the final judgment. Therefore, writes Robertson, the passage means only that "throughout the whole of the present age, until the final return of Christ, hardening will continue among part of Israel."

Here I do find myself disagreeing with the author, for in my judgment that is just not what
Romans 11:25 says. There is nothing to indicate that this verse is speaking of the return of Christ, the final judgment, or any such thing, but of the future of the Jews, and it is saying that they will be converted. We will come back to this when we look at the second explanation.

3. *The words "and so all Israel shall be saved" (v. 26a) should read* "in this way *all Israel shall be saved," meaning that the elect among Israel will be saved by responding to the gospel just as they are currently doing.* This is not foolish reasoning, of course. Robertson is an excellent scholar, and his view is probably the prevailing current view among Reformed Bible students and theologians. But, in my judgment, it overlooks the flow of the chapter. During my student days I was told that the future

explanation was a dispensational view only and that no Reformed theologians held to it. Having studied these views carefully, I find instead that the majority of the great commentators on Romans, including Reformed commentators, recognize that the passage is speaking of a future day of Jewish conversion. Moreover, they see a future gathering-in of Israel as the point to which the chapter has been moving. The pattern is:

The *possibility* of a time of future Jewish conversions: "God is able to graft them in again" (v. 23), The *probability* of a time of future Jewish conversions: "How much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree" (v. 24), and The *certainty* of a time of future Jewish conversions: "And so all Israel will be saved" (v. 26a).

The Future Explanation

Among commentators who defend the second view—the future explanation—none is more thorough than Charles Hodge. He gives eight reasons why the passage is looking forward to a time of future blessing for ethnic Israel. At this point I set his arguments over against Robertson's.

1. *"The whole context and drift of the apostle's discourse is in... favor" of the second view.* Hodge discusses the earlier part of the chapter at this point, recalling Paul's statement that the eventual conversion of the Jews is a probable event that would be in the fullest measure beneficial and glorious for the world (v. 12). The only natural extension of that is their actual conversion.

2. *"It is evident that Paul meant to say that the Jews were to be restored in the sense in which they were then rejected."* In the earlier part of the chapter Paul was speaking of the rejection of the Jews not as individuals, but as a nation or community. "Jews" as an ethnic grouping is contrasted with "Gentiles" as an ethnic grouping. Therefore, when Paul speaks of a future time of Jewish conversion he must be thinking of a general conversion of this ethnic body. "How can [verse 15] be understood of the conversion

of the small number of Jews which, from age to age, have joined the Christian church?" Hodge asks. "This surely has not been 'life from the dead,' for the whole world."

3. *"It is plain from this and other parts of the discourse that Paul refers to a great event, something which should attract universal attention."* The conversion of a few Jews and their addition to the church from time to time does not fit this expectation.

4. The introduction to verse 25 ("I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers") is in words Paul normally uses *"when he wishes to rouse the attention of his readers to something especially important."* The conversion of a few Jews from time to time does not fit this definition. Nor is it something really new, since he has already spoken of the remnant of those who are being converted several times previously.

5. *"The gradual conversion of a few Jews is no 'mystery.'"* In the Bible's language, a mystery is something that at one time was unknown but has now been revealed. Knowledge of the gradual conversion of a few Jews does not require any special revelation. On the contrary, it is a fact of simple observation.

6. *"The words 'all Israel' cannot... be understood of 'spiritual' Israel, because the word is just before used in a different sense*." The Israel that has experienced "a hardening in part" (v. 25) is ethnic Israel. It cannot be spiritual Israel, because what distinguishes spiritual Israel from ethnic Israel is that spiritual Israel is not hardened but rather has turned (or will turn) from sin and has embraced (or will embrace) Jesus Christ as Savior. Since ethnic Israel is what is referred to in verse 25, the word cannot be used in an entirely different sense in verse 26, which immediately follows. If it is ethnic Israel which has been hardened, it must be ethnic Israel which will be saved.

7. *"The words... correctly rendered in our version 'until' cannot... be translated 'as long as' or 'so that,' followed as they are here by the*

aorist subjunctive." This is a technical matter that must be argued by experts in the fine points of Greek grammar. It is enough to note here that it is directly opposed to Robertson's interpretation of "until," summarized under point 2 above.

8. *"The following verses seem to require this interpretation.*" In these verses the result that is contemplated is a full accomplishment of the ancient prophecies, which predict a general Jewish salvation. What is more, the reason given is the unchangeable nature of God's purposes and covenant, which Paul establishes in verse 26 by combining sentences from Isaiah 59:20-21 and 27:9. His quotation reads:

The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godliness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.

The rejection of the Jews in Paul's day did not involve every individual of Jewish descent, and the conversion of the Jews in this future day likewise will not necessarily involve every individual Jewish person. But as the masses of Israel are rejected now, so the masses of Israel will be converted then because, having once taken the Jews into a special relationship with himself, God, "whose gifts and... call are irrevocable" (v. 29), will not cast them off.

It is hard for me to discover any other valid meaning than this obvious meaning of the passage.

Some Practical Applications

We are not living in the future, however. So although the promise of a day of future blessing for the Jewish people is important for how we are to think of God's promises, gifts, and covenant, I want to end not by thinking ahead to some future day, but rather by applying Paul's teaching to how we should think and act now.

I begin by going back to my opening illustration, which was Ezekiel's experience in the valley of dry bones. This illustration teaches that the

salvation of any individual, Jew or Gentile, is a miracle of God and therefore depends on God as much as does the resurrection of a great army of soldiers from mere bones. This is exactly the teaching of Romans 11, of course. For, having spoken of individual Jews as branches that have been broken off from the olive tree that is rooted in the patriarchs, Paul has also spoken of them being grafted back in. That is not humanly possible. Therefore, although it is nevertheless possible, it is so only because "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

Leon Morris writes, "If the orchardist wanted certain branches in his tree he would not have cut them off in the first place. But Paul is not talking about orchardists; he is talking about God, and the orchard is no more than an illustration. He is talking about a miracle of grace and assuring his readers that God is able to perform that miracle."

That is what we need, too, of course. We need this supernatural working of God in our minds to give us understanding of the gospel, in our hearts to give us an affection for Jesus Christ, and in our wills to bring us to the point of a personal turning from sin to faith in the Savior.

But we are slow to admit our need of God's gracious working.

What could have caused such blindness? It is a failure to understand four great truths that the meaning of grace presupposes.

1. *The sin of man.* We are complacent about our spiritual condition, so we assume that God is also. The thought that we are fallen creatures who are in rebellion against God's rightful rule seldom enters our heads.
2. *The judgment of God.* Most of us have lost appreciation for all cause-and-effect links, especially in moral areas. So the idea of a final judgment of God at the end of human history, when sin will be punished, seems fantastic to us.
3. *Our spiritual inability.* Our society has taught us that for man "all things are possible." We believe we are the masters of our own fate, the captains of our own ship. So the idea that we need the

grace of God in order to get right with God, because we cannot save ourselves, seems—well, it just seems wrong, frankly. We assume that it will always be possible for us to mend our relationships with God.

4. *The sovereign freedom of God.* In this day of so-called human rights, we assume that God owes us something: salvation or at least a chance at salvation. But God does not have to show us favor. He does—that is what the gospel is about—but he does not need to. The freedom of God to give or withhold favor is the very essence of salvation. The Bible teaches that "salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9), and the sooner we acknowledge that important truth the better.

Salvation Is from God

Yes, but it is nevertheless also to be received by faith. Salvation depends on God, because only "God is able" to do what is needed. But notice what Paul says: *"If they do not persist in unbelief,* they will be grafted in" (emphasis added). We have seen that because the Jews are God's specifically chosen people it is: (1) possible, (2) probable, and (3) certain that they will be saved as a nation in the final days. But these specifically chosen people must nevertheless also believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. And if they must have faith, clearly we must also. No one can be saved without faith. I cannot be saved without faith. You cannot be saved without faith. *No one can be saved without faith.*

When Peter preached at Pentecost, he emphasized the electing grace of God in salvation, saying,
"The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). But Peter did not understand the sovereignty of God in salvation to eliminate the need for saving faith. His message was: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (v. 38). The passage concludes, "With many other words he warned them;

and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'" (v. 40).

My message is exactly the same. Salvation is of the Lord. But it comes by the preaching of the gospel and is something you enter only when you turn from sin and place your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior. God saves, but he saves by bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. Won't you believe that gospel and trust Jesus, if you have never believed on Jesus before? Today the door of God's grace stands open, and the promise of the Bible is that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Chapter 166.
The Mystery of Jewish Hardening

Romans 11:25

In this volume of the *Romans* series, we have been studying Paul's unfolding of the purposes of
God in history for more than forty chapters, focusing on the nation of Israel, and we come in Romans 11:25-32 to the last of the seven major points Paul is making. His theme here is the future conversion of the great mass of Israel in the final days.

Most commentators recognize that this is a new section and therefore separate it from the preceding verses by descriptive titles. Leon Morris calls verses 25 through 32 "The Conversion of Israel. "John Murray describes this section as "The Fullness of the Gentiles and the Salvation of Israel." C. K. Barrett titles it "God's Plan Complete." Ray Stedman labels it "Our Great and Glorious God." H. C. G. Moule calls these verses "The Restoration of Israel Directly Foretold: All Is of and for God." William Barclay calls them "That All May Be of Mercy."

So also in our Bibles. The New International Version follows this line when it titles Romans 11:25-32 "All Israel Will Be Saved."

Clearly, this section is the culmination of what Paul has been saying in chapters 9 through 11 of this letter. He introduced his line of thought in verse 6 of Romans 9, wondering rhetorically if God's purposes in history may have failed, since so many Jews, God's specially chosen people, have rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah. Our earlier studies have shown that Paul denied this implication and has been giving reasons for an entirely different view, namely, that God is still in control of history. Therefore, all that has happened both in the rejection of Israel and the conversion of Gentiles has been according to God's wise and perfect plan. You will recall that Paul has seven arguments to show that God's purposes have not been sidetracked by Israel's unbelief:

1. God's historical purposes have not failed, because *all whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved* (Rom. 9:6-24).
2. God's purposes have not failed, because *God had previously revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be* (Rom. 9:25-29).
3. God's purposes have not failed, because *the unbelief of the Jews was their own responsibility, not God's* (Rom. 9:30-10:21).
4. God has not failed, because *some Jews (Paul himself was an example) have believed and have been saved* (Rom. 11:1).
5. God has not failed, because *it has always been the case that not all Jews but only a remnant has been saved* (Rom. 11:2-10).
6. God's plans have not failed, because *the salvation of the Gentiles, which is now occurring, is meant to arouse Israel to envy and thus be the means of saving some of them* (Rom. 11:11-24).
7. Finally, God's historical purposes toward the Jewish nation have not failed, because *in the end all Israel will be saved, and thus God will be seen to have honored his promises toward Israel nationally* (Rom. 11:25-32).

It is this final point, the last of the seven, to which we come now.

The "Mysteries" of God

In the earlier portion of Romans 11, Paul has argued both the possibility and probability of the conversion of the mass of Jewish people. Now he moves from argument to prophecy, stating the certainty of the blessing that shall one day be, and this means that what he has to say now is in the nature of special revelation.

This is the significance of the word *mystery* in verse 25. When we use that word, we have in mind something that is puzzling or unknown. One dictionary calls it "something that has not been, or cannot be, explained; something beyond human comprehension; a profound secret; an enigma." However, that is not the meaning of the word in the New Testament, in Paul's writings specifically, or, for that matter, in the ancient world in general.

In the ancient world a mystery was something unknown to most people but specially revealed to some. This was the meaning of the word as used of the ancient mystery religions, for example. The existence of these religions (Mithras, Isis and Osirus, Dionysus, Attis and Cybele, Eleusis and others) was known to nearly everybody. But the specifics of their religious rites were known only to initiates, much like today's Masons, who also have secret rites, signs, handshakes, and symbols of which most people are unaware.

The apostle Paul uses the word in this way but with specifically biblical elements. He uses "mystery" to refer to something that at one time was not known and could not be arrived at by any amount of human reasoning, but that has now been revealed to us by God through such inspired teachers as himself and the other apostles.

Charles Hodge says, "Any future event... which could be known only by divine revelation is a mystery."

This was an important term for Paul, which means that he was aware of being the channel of such divine revelation for our benefit. One proof of this is the number of times he uses the word *mystery* and the variety of ways in which he uses it. Some years ago, H. A. Ironside, a former

minister of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, wrote a book on *The Mysteries of God* in which he explored these formerly hidden but now known doctrines at some length. It is not one of Ironside's best books, in my judgment, since it is poorly written and strongly dispensational. Nevertheless, it has the important virtue of being somewhat comprehensive. In it Ironside explored:

1. "The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 13:11)
2. "The Mystery of the Olive Tree" (Romans 11:25)
3. "The Great Mystery of Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:32)
4. "The Mystery of Piety" (1 Timothy 3:16)
5. "The Mystery of the Rapture of the Saints" (1 Corinthians 15:51)
6. "The Mystery of Lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:7)
7. "The Mystery of God Finished" (Revelation 10:7).

Ironside's main point was that the mysteries of the New Testament are things we should know, yet strangely are largely ignored by masses of today's Christians. We should not be ignorant of these things. It is true that "the secret things belong to the LORD our God," but the mysteries are among those that are revealed and therefore "belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut. 29:29). Ministers are to be faithful stewards of these truths (1 Cor. 4:1).

Israel's Future: A Mystery

This brings us back to the specific mystery Paul is writing about here, namely, that the mass of Israel will be saved. Why is it a mystery? Obviously, because it is not something any of us would ever figure out by mere reason or deduce by observation. As far as we can see, Israel has been rejected permanently. We do not see even a glimmer of national restoration. But what we cannot see or deduce Paul declares by revelation to be a future fact: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part

until the full number of the Gentiles has come in," and then "all Israel will be saved" (vv. 25-26).

We have already looked at this statement in some detail, trying to weigh the arguments for and against belief in a time of future Jewish blessing. It is not necessary to argue them again here. Instead, we need only explore the key phrases in the statement more fully.

The "full number" of the Gentiles is actually only "fullness" in the Greek text, but the New International Version is surely right when it amplifies the term by adding the word *number.* Fullness could mean "fullness of blessing," meaning that some Gentiles will receive the full measure of those blessings originally given to the Jews. But Paul has not been dealing with that idea. He has been asking why not many Jews have been saved and why so many Gentiles have been saved instead, and he is prophesying that in the future large numbers of Jews will be converted. In this context the "fullness of the Gentiles" must mean their full number, that is, all the elect to be saved from among the many Gentile nations.

How about the word *until?* We have already seen that this is not a *terminus a quo,* an ending after which nothing else should be expected. Rather, it is a *terminus ad quem,* an ending of one thing, after which something else will happen.

I have not been trying to develop a full treatment of prophecy in our study of Romans 11, because it is not called for. I have merely been trying to explain what Paul is teaching in chapters 9-11. But I should mention that when Paul says "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in," he is saying almost exactly what Jesus said when he noted that "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). The context shows that Jesus was thinking of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, which happened under the Roman general Titus in 70 A.D. He was saying that the capital would be in Gentile hands until the end of the "times of the Gentiles," presumably an age of Gentile prominence if not also of widespread Gentile spiritual blessing.

If we think about such things, we can hardly escape noticing that in our lifetimes the city of Jerusalem has once again come under Jewish control, as a result of the reestablishment of the modern state of Israel. This suggests that the Gentile age may be drawing to a close, as Jesus predicted.

The Point of Prophecy

The point of prophecy is never merely to give God's people some special insight into what will one day happen, an insight not possessed by unbelievers. It is always practical; it is revealed for its bearing on how we are to live now. With that in mind we ask: What is the reason for the revelation of this mystery? Why does Paul tell us that "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in"?

It is not hard to find the answer. He tells us in this very verse. It is "so that you may not be conceited."

What does that mean?

Let me suggest a few answers.

1. *We should not be conceited in thinking that Gentile believers have replaced Jewish believers permanently.*

There are two forms of this error, as I see it. One is a mild form; the other is particularly evil. The mild form is sometimes seen among Reformed theologians and takes the shape of denying that anything spiritual can exist beyond or in addition to the church. I realize there is a valid concern in this. Since the forms and types of the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, these writers cannot think of going back to anything. It seems to them that if God is thought of as having anything more to do with the Jews as a nation, this must necessarily be a regression. It is to reconstitute a physical people rather than a spiritual people. It is to substitute an earthly kingdom for a heavenly one.

Some others have probably erred in this direction, too. But it seems nevertheless to be a uniquely Gentile form of conceit to suppose that God cannot also begin to work among the Jews after his special saving work among the Gentiles shall have ended. Indeed, how can we presume to limit what God can do historically, even by our Reformed theology? If God says that there will be a day of future Jewish blessing, then there will be one, and we must be humbled by this revelation.

The intense and evil form of this error is anti-Semitism, particularly that which grows out of Gentile Christian arrogance. I am aware that intolerance is not limited to Christians. All over the world, ethnic or racial groups are prejudiced against other groups. A song that I remember from my college days goes:

> The whole world is festering with unhappy souls:
> The French hate the Germans; the Germans hate the Poles; Italians hate Yugoslavs; South Africans hate the Dutch, And I don't like anybody very much.

A sinful world is like that. But the fact of universal prejudice does not excuse anti-Semitism among Gentile Christians. Unfortunately, we must acknowledge that this has often existed. After all, it is so-called Christians, not Buddhists or Moslems or animists, who have called the Jews "Christ-killers," forgetting that it was a Roman governor named Pilate who actually delivered Jesus to death. Whenever Gentile Christians start thinking of themselves as having somehow replaced the Jews in God's dealings, they must remember that the Jews are "loved [still] on account of the patriarchs" (Rom. 11:28) and that God says he has a spiritual future for them even yet.

2. *We should not be conceited in thinking that a Gentile church is the culmination of God's dealings in history.*

The fact that there is to be something beyond ourselves and our age in God's historical dealings should humble us in another way also. It should teach us that we are not the "be all" and "end all" of God's plans.

Indeed, it should warn us that Christianity will not certainly triumph in our hands. There was a time in the last century and earlier in this one when many Christians in the West thought like this, and their thinking bore fruit in a form of post-millennialism that held that Christianity would inevitably conquer the earth before the return of Jesus Christ.

One who has held this view is Loraine Boettner, who has authored such valuable books as *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination, Studies in Theology, Immortality,* and *The Millennium.* More than thirty years ago, in an article in *Christianity Today,* Boettner wrote:

The redemption of the world... is a long slow process, extending through the centuries, yet surely approaching an appointed goal. We live in the day of advancing victory and see the conquest taking place. From the human viewpoint there are many apparent setbacks, and it often looks as though the forces of evil are about to gain the upper hand. But as one age succeeds another, there is progress. Looking back across the nearly two thousand years that have elapsed since the coming of Christ, we see that there has been marvelous progress. All over the world, pagan religions have had their day and are disintegrating. None of them can stand the open competition of Christianity. They await only the *coup de grace* of an aroused and energetic Christianity to send them into oblivion.... The Church *must* conquer the world, or the world will destroy the church. Christianity is *the system* of truth, the only one that through the ages has had the blessing of God upon it. We shall not expect the final fruition within our lifetime, nor within this century.

But the goal is certain and the outcome sure. The future is as bright as the promises of God. The great requirement is faith that the Great Commission of Christ will be fulfilled through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and preaching of the everlasting Gospel.

That is strong propaganda. And, of course, much of it is true. The work of God *will* triumph. We *are* called to proclaim the gospel worldwide. The gospel *will be* widely known. But this is not the same thing as saying that Christianity, as an historical force, will triumph. Or that Gentile Christianity will one day rule the world.

Moreover, although we can understand how a philosophy like this gained acceptance in a day when the western nations were at the peak of their economic and political power and therefore seemed to dominate the world, we can hardly make such an easy assumption about the flow of history today. The West and western Christianity are surely in decline. And although it is true that Christianity is growing rapidly in the Third World, it is also true that other world religions are also growing. Fueled by oil revenues, the religion of Islam is particularly ascendant.

We must not forget that Jesus once asked pointedly, "When the Son of Man comes [returns], will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Or that when Peter wrote of the last days, he did not say that Christendom would triumph, but rather that "there will be false teachers among you [who] will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them.... Many will follow their shameful ways..." (2 Peter 2:1-2).

Or that Jude reminded us of the apostles' warning that "in the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires," adding, "These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit" (Jude 18-19).

Or that Paul also wrote, "... in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim. 4:1).

None of these passages encourages us to believe in an inevitable expanding triumph of Gentile
Christianity. On the contrary, they warn us of unbelief, apostasy, and false teaching before Christ's return. I do not mean to say that Christianity will perish from the earth, for God will have his remnant among the Gentiles, just as he has had his remnant among the Jews. But I do mean to say that Gentile believers dare not be arrogant but should instead "be afraid," knowing that "if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare [us] either" (Rom. 11:20-21).

Knowing that God has a future for the Jews after the Gentile age has drawn to an end should temper and diffuse our nearly insufferable conceit.

3. *We should not be conceited in thinking that in ourselves we are something special.*

Believers in Christ are special to God, of course. But I am not thinking of that. I am thinking of the tendency we have to assume that the reason we are saved and that others are not saved is because we are wiser or more holy or more perceptive or more significant than they are. We are not saved for any of these reasons. We are *not* wiser or more holy or more perceptive or more significant than others. On the contrary, "God [has chosen] the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

If God has chosen the foolish things now and will one day renew a work among his ancient people when the times of the Gentiles shall have been completed, we can never suppose that we are special. Instead, we can only acknowledge that we are saved on account of the mercy of God and by his immeasurable grace.

4. *We should not be conceited in somehow thinking that other people, who are not like us, are hopeless.*

It is easy for us to abandon hope for others. When we see a person who has squandered his or her spiritual opportunities or who has vigorously opposed Christianity or has sinned in some particularly dreadful fashion, we conclude that there is probably no chance for such a person. We write him or her off and say such things as: "The Jews have rejected Jesus, so they are lost," or "My friends will not have Christ, so they are lost." That is the way we think. But we must not think that way, for it is never true. God is the God of all hopeless causes, ourselves included. John Newton was surely close to God's heart when he replied to

someone who spoke to him of an acquaintance for whom he despaired, "I have never despaired of any man since God saved me."

What about you? You may be laboring under the thought that you are a hopeless case, because of who you are or because of something you may have done or said or thought. Or you may have a family member whose case seems to you to be hopeless. I assure you on the basis of the Word of God that the case is not hopeless. And you are not hopeless either! Only unbelief keeps a person from salvation, and even today you may still call upon the name of the Lord and be wonderfully saved.

Chapter 167.
"All Israel Will Be Saved"

Romans 11:26-27

About one hundred years ago, Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, was having a discussion with his chaplain about the truth of the Bible. The king had become skeptical about Christianity, largely through the influence of the French atheist Voltaire. So he said to his chaplain, "If your Bible is really true, it ought to be capable of very easy proof. So often, when I have asked for proof of the inspiration of the Bible, I have been given some large tome that I have neither the time nor desire to read. If your Bible is really from God, you should be able to demonstrate the fact simply. Give me proof for the inspiration of the Bible in a word."

The chaplain replied, "Your Majesty, it is possible for me to answer your request literally. I can give you the proof you ask for in one word."

Frederick was amazed at this response. "What is this magic word that carries such a weight of proof?" he asked.

"Israel," said the chaplain.

Frederick was silent.

There are many other proofs for Christianity, of course. But it can hardly be doubted that the continuing existence of Israel as a distinct people throughout the four thousand years of her history is a striking phenomenon. Dispossessed of her homeland and dispersed throughout the world, Israel has nevertheless survived while other peoples in similar situations have not. Coupled with the Bible's identification of the Jews as God's elect people and its many prophecies concerning their unfolding history, the preservation of Israel as a people is strong evidence for the Bible being the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

Even more than that, and much to the purpose for our study, the survival of Israel suggests that God has preserved these people through their many dispersions and persecutions not because he does not care for them, but because he *does*, and because he has a plan for the Jewish people that will unfold in blessing in the last days.

Proof from Isaiah

Romans 11:26 is the conclusion and clearest statement of this argument, the bottom line of Paul's discussion of God's historical purposes with the Jews, namely, that in the last days God will fulfill his promises to the Jews nationally by bringing the mass of Israel to faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah: "And so all Israel will be saved."

We have already made that point several times over in the studies that have been leading up to this one, but what is unique about verse 26 is the fact that here at last Paul proves his argument from the Old Testament. This has been his pattern before, as I have already pointed out several times. Paul's pattern is to make his argument first and then, when he has completed it, to nail it down with one or more Old Testament citations. He did this in chapter 3, after having argued the case for human depravity. He did it again in chapter 4, after explaining the gospel at the end of the previous chapter. The same pattern was followed in chapters 9 and 10.

This is opposite to the pattern followed by the apostle Peter, to give just one contrary example. In his sermon on Pentecost, Peter first gave his

texts and then argued from them, rather than the other way around. He did this three times, expounding Christian truth on the basis of Joel 2:2832, Psalm 16:8-11, and Psalm 110:1 (cf. Acts 2:14-41).

In Romans 11, Paul proves his argument concerning Israel by a quotation from Isaiah 59:20-21. Isaiah 27:9, Jeremiah 31:33-34, and Psalm 14:7 may have also been in his mind, since he seems to have included wording from those additional verses in his quotation.

However, there are two ways in which this quotation can be taken, and, not surprisingly, they correspond to the two ways of looking at what Paul is saying about Israel, which I have already examined. The text could be saying that the Redeemer will emerge out of Israel in order to take away the people's sins by his death on the cross. In that case, it would be a reference to Jesus' first coming and earthly ministry. Or else it could be saying that Jesus will come out of heaven to Israel in order to turn the hearts of the people from unbelief to faith. In this case, it would (or could) be referring to a time of future blessing. Those who do not believe in a future period of national conversion for Israel naturally incline to the former interpretation. Those who think Paul is prophesying an age of future blessing choose the latter.

I have already indicated my reasons for choosing the second of these views. I add here that in my judgment the emphasis in Paul's quotation of Isaiah 59:20 is on the future tense of the verb "to be," that is, the words "will come." From Isaiah's point in history, to say that the Messiah "will come" could be a reference only to Jesus' first coming. But from Paul's vantage point, which followed that first coming, the verb must be looking to a period still future, and Paul must be thinking of it.

Here are two observations that are very important.

1. Although by itself the passage in Isaiah could refer either to the first coming of Jesus or to a time of future blessing of Israel by God, from the point at which Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has interpreted it as referring to this future blessing, *we have*

the proper meaning and ought to interpret the verses in this way. In other words, to go back to the idea of the "mystery" Paul says he is revealing (v. 25), it is as if Paul acknowledges that readers of the Bible could not be sure what Isaiah was referring to before this revelation but that now we can be sure of it because of what he is teaching.

Robert Haldane says, "We may be assured that the Apostle, speaking by the same Spirit as the Prophet, and directed by the Spirit to quote him, has... given the meaning of his words."

Following a similar line of thought, Charles Hodge says, "We are, of course, bound to receive the apostle's interpretation as correct."

2. My second observation is that *this positions us to see many passages that might otherwise be construed as referring only to a past blessing as actually referring to a day of future blessing*, or at least possibly referring to it. This is what John Murray is arguing when he says, "This express application is an index to the principle of interpretation which would have to be applied to many other Old Testament passages which are in the same vein as Isaiah 59:20, 21, namely, that they comprise the promise of an expansion of gospel blessing such as Paul enunciates in verses 25, 26."

If that is right, this is the place in our exposition to recognize that there are other Old Testament texts that should be seen as prophesying the future conversion of the mass of Israel and to look at some of them.

Old Testament Texts

There must be hundreds of such passages. An exhaustive study would fill volumes. Yet here are some that are especially significant.

1. *Jeremiah 16:14-16.*'"... the days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when men will no longer say, "As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt," but they will say, "As surely as the LORD lives, who brought Israelites up out of the land

> of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them." For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers. But now I will send for many fishermen,' declares the LORD, 'and they will catch them. After that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks.'"

Since Jeremiah was writing before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian armies under
Nebuchadnezzar, this might be taken as a prophecy of the return of the Jews to Judah in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, and it may even have had a partial fulfillment at that time. However, in view of the apostle Paul's understanding of Isaiah 59:20-21, it may also be referring to a more important return of Israel to her ancient homeland in the last days.

In fact, when we begin to think of the text along these lines, the words "and out of all the countries where he had banished them" take on new meaning. For now the prophecy is seen not merely as foretelling the return of the Jews from one nation alone, that is, from Babylon, but from all the world's nations, where the Jews have indeed been scattered and from which they must come if they are to return to the land of Israel.

2. *Jeremiah 32:36-40.* In Jeremiah 32, the chapter in which God tells Jeremiah to buy a field as a symbol of his lasting commitment to the Jewish homeland, God says, "You are saying about this city, 'By the sword, famine and plague it will be handed over to the king of Babylon'; but this is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me."

Like Jeremiah 16:14-16, this passage seems at first to be referring only to the return of the Jews to Jerusalem from Babylon, even though some of the elements in the prophecy do not seem to fit perfectly, for instance, that the people will serve God in "singleness of heart" and "always fear" him, and that God will make "an everlasting covenant with them." Singleness of heart hardly describes the history of the people from the days of Ezra and Nehemiah on. In fact, they were as wayward then as ever, and in the days of Jesus they actually turned against their Messiah.

On the other hand, as soon as we begin to think in terms of a still future blessing, the idea of "singleness of heart" and "always fearing" God and "an everlasting covenant" have an exact meaning and are seen to refer to the same future conversion of the mass of Israel that Paul is prophesying.

3. *Hosea 1:10 and 2:21-23.* A classic and often re-echoed prophecy of this future age is found in Hosea's symbolic naming of his children and God's promise to change their names in that day. Hosea called his children *Jezreel* (meaning "scattered"), *Lo-Ruhamah* (meaning "Not-Loved"), and *Lo-Ammi* (meaning "Not-My-People"). But God said, changing the names to Planted, Loved, and My People, "I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one,' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'" (See study 135, "'Children of the Living God,'" in this volume.)

There are prophecies similar to this toward the end of many of the minor prophets (cf. Joel 3:1721; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 7:8-20; Zeph. 3:9-20).

4. *Zechariah 12-14.* Special attention should be given to the last three chapters of Zechariah, which are presented as "an oracle" about the final days. The words "on that day," which customarily refer to God's final wrapping-up of history, including the last judgment,

occur sixteen times and tie the chapters together. These chapters describe a time in which:

First, God will deliver Jerusalem from the nations of the earth, which are attacking her (12:1-9),

Second, the people will "look on... the one they have pierced" and "mourn for him" (12:10-13),

Third, a "fountain" will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem "to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (13:1-3),

Fourth, the people will call on God, causing him to say, as in Hosea 2:23, "They are my people," and the people to say, "The LORD is our God" (13:9),

Fifth, the Lord will descend on the Mount of Olives to save the people in a time of great trouble, deliver Jerusalem, and bring prosperity to the land (14:1-15), Sixth, Gentiles will go to Jerusalem to worship God (14:16-19), and

Seventh, the people will become holy in all they are and do (14:20-21).

Nothing like this has ever happened; therefore, it must be future. Besides, these things were written after the regathering of the people in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra, which means that they cannot refer to those past days but must refer instead to a time yet future. That is, they must refer to the time of future Jewish belief about which Paul is writing.

Jews for Jesus

At this point the natural reaction is to say that widespread Jewish conversions are unlikely, considering the traditionally strong opposition of Judaism to Jesus and Christianity. But even if we are only looking at this from a human point of view, it may not be as far out as many think, because there seems to be a new interest in Jesus by Jewish thinkers.

Sholem Asch, a Polish Jew who was one of the best-known Jewish writers of his day, said in an interview published in the *Christian Herald* many years ago:

Since I first met him [Jesus], he has held my mind and heart.... I was seeking that something for which so many of us search—that surety, that faith, that spiritual content in my living which would bring me peace and through which I might bring some peace to others. I found it in the Nazarene....

Jesus Christ, to me, is the outstanding personality of all time, of all history, both as Son of God and as Son of Man.... No other religious leader... has ever become so personal a part of people as The Nazarene. When you understand Jesus, you understand that he came to save you, to come into your personality. It isn't just a case of a misty, uncertain relationship between a worshipper and an unseen God; that is abstract; Jesus is personal."

Constantine Brunner, the German Jewish philosopher, looked upon Jesus as the great representative of pure Judaism. He wrote:

Is it only the Jew who is incapable of seeing and hearing all that others see and hear? Are the Jews stricken with blindness and deafness as regards Messiah Jesus, so that to them alone he has nothing to say?... Understand, then, what we shall do: We shall bring him back to us. Messiah Jesus is not dead for us—for us he has not yet lived: and he will not slay us, he will make us alive again. His profound and holy words, and all that is true and heart-appealing in the New Testament, must from now on be heard in our synagogues and taught to our children, in order that the wrong we had committed may be made good, the curse turned into a blessing, and that he at last may find us who has always been seeking after us.

Ferdynand Zweig, a contemporary English Jew who has taught at the Hebrew and Tel Aviv universities, says, "The Jewish religion seems to be at present to the large mass of Israeli Jews uninspiring and uninspired. Could it be that Jesus could give it a new lease of life?"

Hans Joachim Schoeps, the Jewish theologian who taught the history of religion at Erlangen University in Germany, wrote:

The Messianism of Israel aims at that which is to come, the eschatology of the Gentile church at the return of him who has come. Both elective covenants confront the ebb and flow of the finite world in the shared expectation that the decisive event is still to come—the goal of the ways of God that he travels with mankind in Israel and in the Church, The church of Jesus Christ has preserved no portrait of its lord and savior. If Jesus were to come again tomorrow, no Christian would know his face. But it might well be that he who is coming at the end of days, he who is awaited by the synagogue as by the church, is one, with one and the same face.

None of these authors has accepted Jesus as his personal Savior from sin, and no one would say on the basis of these quotations that the Jews as a whole are ready to accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah. But they do indicate what even many Jews are calling a new openness to Jesus and suggest, to Christians at least, that the time of future national conversion that Paul writes of in Romans, may not be far distant.

Jews and the Gentile Church

I close with a few observations on what God's historical dealings with the Jewish people mean for today's largely Gentile church.

First, the experience of Israel through the thousands of years of her history is a demonstration of the biblical principle that where there is obedience there will be blessing, and where there is disobedience there will be judgments. Israel has suffered many judgments during the centuries of her disobedience to God's law and rejection of God's Messiah. But it is the same for Christians. God is not mocked. If we disobey God's Word and persist in going our own way, God will discipline us, gently if he can but also forcefully if he must. Many believers have been so disciplined. You may be one. Learn from it. You cannot fight against God successfully.

Second, God is faithful to his covenant. We are going to pursue this in our next study, because it is the explicit teaching of Romans 11:27 ("And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins"). This is an encouragement because it tells us that God will not give up on those whom he has chosen, even if our sins cause him to turn away his face for a time.

Third, there is a lesson about grace. For ultimately that is what this discussion is all about. God's relationship to Israel is a tremendous illustration of his grace. Chosen, yet frightfully disobedient, even to the point of rejecting and actually killing the very Son of God sent to them, Israel nevertheless has been loved by God, continues to be loved by him, and will one day be brought back to God—because God is gracious. This is our God, too. The New Testament calls today the day of God's grace.

But this day of grace will not last forever, and the regathering of Israel in her own land may indicate that God's days of grace are fast drawing to a close. Where do you stand in your relationship to Jesus, who came into this world and died on the cross to save you?

He is coming again! Will you be ready for him when he comes?

The Bible says, "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Heb. 2:l-3a).

Chapter 168.
God's Irrevocable Covenant

Romans 11:27

In the last study I said I would return to the subject of God's covenant in this one, because of verse 27. A covenant is a solemn promise, usually

ratified in some formal way. But I begin with a preliminary question: Is the covenant idea important for understanding biblical theology?

Covenant theologians will immediately answer, "Yes, of course. "And I must confess that I believe this is right. I will show why as I go along. But the question is still reasonable, if for no other reason than that the idea does not seem to be very important in Romans. Although this is the greatest doctrinal book in the New Testament, as almost everyone will agree, the word *covenant* occurs only twice in the letter: once in Romans 9:4, where it is mentioned as one of the advantages of Judaism ("Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, *the covenants*") and the second time in our text ("And this is my *covenant* with them when I take away their sins").

The first is a bare mention, with no elaboration at all. The second is a quotation from the Old Testament. In neither case does the apostle develop what is called a covenant theology.

I suppose that is the best defense I have for my personal neglect of the covenant idea in *Foundations of the Christian Faith.* produced that large volume over five years' time, and it contains over 700 pages of material. Yet although it mentions the word *covenant* in a few places, it does not develop an explicit covenant theology. One of my friends chastised me for that on one occasion, wondering how a "covenant theologian" like myself could write what I call "a comprehensive" theology and ignore this subject.

Many Covenants

In my opinion, the idea does not have quite the prominence in the Bible that many covenant theologians give it. In fact, covenant theology itself was not worked out until late in the Reformation period by two of the followers of John Calvin: Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) and Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587). They developed the idea of two main covenants: a covenant of works established between God and Adam, and a covenant of grace established between God the Father and God

the Son. Nevertheless, the covenant idea is important, as even a very quick look at the biblical material shows.

In Hebrew the word for "covenant" is *bʾrith*. It occurs more than 300 times in the Old Testament and is translated as "covenant" 257 times (NIV). The Greek word is *diathêkê*. It occurs 36 times in the New Testament, more than half of them in the letter to the Hebrews.

We can approach the subject from the number or types of covenants that are mentioned in the Bible. Everyone seems to have a different listing at this point, which complicates matters, but most lists would include:

1. *God's covenant with Adam* (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:16-17). The word *covenant* is not used in the account of God's promises and warnings to Adam, but it is assumed that God established something like a covenant with him. According to the terms of this covenant, Adam was to enjoy the fullness of God's blessing upon the condition of perfect obedience in the matter of the forbidden tree. If he should stand that test, his posterity would stand with him. If he should fail that test, he would bring judgment and death upon the race. Paul seems to be thinking of this covenant in Romans 5:12-19, though the word *covenant* does not occur in that chapter either.
2. *God's covenant with Noah* (Gen. 6:18; 9:9-17). This was a promise never again to destroy the world by flood. It was confirmed by the sign of the rainbow.
3. *God's covenant with Abraham* (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-22). The first two covenants, those with Adam and Noah, had to do with the human race generally. The covenant with Abraham concerns the nation of Israel and involves the following promises: that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, that God would give this people an extensive land of their own, that the land would be theirs forever, that the Redeemer would come through this line of descent, and that God would bless all the peoples of the world through this Redeemer. This covenant was repeated with

Abraham's two immediate descendants: his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob.

4. *God's covenant with the Jews through Moses* (Exod. 19:5-6; 24:7-8; 34:28; Deut. 28:1-30:20). This is sometimes called the Deuteronomic covenant because of its extensive treatment in that book. Like the covenant established with Adam, it is a covenant of blessing contingent upon obedience and of judgment for disobedience.

5. *God's covenant with David* (2 Sam. 7:4-16; 1 Chron. 17:3-14). God promised David that he would establish his throne and kingdom forever, which David recognized to be a promise about the Messiah.

6. *The new covenant* (Jer. 31:31-34; 32:40-41). Jeremiah was the first of the Old Testament writers to use the words "new covenant." He recognized the failure of the people to keep the terms of the old covenant, but he promised a day when God would establish a new covenant in which one of the blessings would be a change of the people's hearts that would enable them to obey God and be holy.

"The time is coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah....
"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Jeremiah 31:31-33

7. *The covenant of grace.* This is not a biblical expression, and only one verse in the Bible even puts the words *covenant* and *grace* together in the same sentence (Heb. 10:29). But "covenant of grace" is a phrase that theologians use alongside "covenant of works," which they use to describe the covenant assumed to have been established between God and Adam. Covenant of grace refers to an agreement between God the Father and God the Son according to which the Father would give a numerous posterity to

Jesus contingent upon the accomplishment of his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

We can gain a quick sense of the importance of the covenant idea by remembering: (1) that our
Bibles are divided into two covenants: the Old Covenant (or Testament) and the New Covenant (or Testament), and (2) that we speak of a covenant every time we observe the Lord's Supper, remembering how Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood..." (Luke 22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).

Unconditional Covenants

We are now ready to look at our text in Romans specifically. When we do, the first thing we notice is that the covenant is described as being God's covenant, that is, a covenant *he* makes: "And this is *my* covenant with them when I take away their sins" (emphasis added). There are covenants in the Bible between human beings, of course, but the significant ones are all between God and man (or men), and *it is God who enacts them.* That is the important thing. Because they are essentially God's promise to do something, they have the character and power of God behind them.

By far the most dramatic example of a covenant is the one established with Abraham, recorded in Genesis 15. The chapter tells how God told Abraham to prepare for a covenant ceremony, just as such ceremonies were apparently enacted in his day. He was to take several animals—a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon—cut each into two parts, and lay the parts on the ground in two rows over against each other. (It is helpful to note that the Hebrew word *bʾrith* is often accompanied by the verb "to cut," therefore literally "to cut a covenant.") In ancient times the parties would stand in the space between the rows of divided animals and make their vows there.

Presumably, the blood of the slain animals, which covered the ground where they stood, made their vows especially solemn and binding.

But here is the interesting thing. After Abraham had prepared the place for the ceremony, God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping God appeared to him, symbolized by a smoking cauldron of fire and a blazing torch. These passed between the pieces of the animals, while Abraham watched. God said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18).

This was not a case of covenant making between equals in which, for example, God would promise to do something and Abraham, for his part, also would promise to do something. In this covenant, God made all the promises, and Abraham was not required to do anything.
Theologians call such covenants unilateral or unconditional covenants, to distinguish them from those that do involve two parties and are conditional.

The Deuteronomic covenant is the chief example of a conditional covenant, since it promises blessing if the people obey and warns of judgment if they do not. It says:

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:

> *You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.*
> *The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.*
> *Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.*
> *You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.*
>
> *Deuteronomy 28:1-6*

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these

curses will come upon you and overtake you:

> *You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country.*
> *Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed.*
> *The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.*
> *You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out."*
>
> *Deuteronomy 28:15-19*

The covenant continues in that vein for several chapters.

Of course, you can see why biblical theologians speak of unconditional covenants, like that established with Abraham, and conditional covenants, like the Deuteronomic covenant. But let me point out that, strictly speaking, all the covenants are unconditional from God's point of view. God sets the terms, and the terms do not alter. They may be without condition: "I will do this, regardless of what you do." They may have multiple responses, depending upon what human beings do: "If you obey, I will bless you; if you do not, I will judge you." But what God promises to do is irrevocable from the start.

Why? It is because God *is* God. He is sovereign in all he does, and he is faithful. He keeps his word. And also because he foresees or, which is a better way of saying it, determines all contingencies. We are not like that. We make promises and then are unable to keep them, because things happen that we could not foresee or because we change. But God does not change, and nothing surprises him. His purposes at the end are exactly what they were at the beginning.

As far as Israel is concerned, this means that God will not forsake the Jews but will continue to work with them as his covenant people, even though they have wandered far from him and for the most part have rejected Jesus Christ. This is why Paul quotes from Isaiah 59 at this point. As John Murray says, "The effect [of this quotation] is that the

future restoration of Israel is certified by nothing less than the certainty belonging to [the] covenantal institution."

A Covenant of Grace

There is another thing we need to see about this covenant and text: It is not only a covenant established by God and therefore something that is unilateral and unconditional, it is also a covenant of salvation, which means that it is a covenant of grace. This is because it is a promise to "take away their sins," and we know that the taking away of sin is done only by the death of Jesus Christ.

This is what the Book of Hebrews emphasizes. I wrote earlier that there are thirty-six uses of the word *covenant* in the New Testament and that more than half of them are in Hebrews. The exact number is nineteen. In that book the author is writing to Jews to show that God has replaced the old covenant, which required obedience but did not promise the means to do it, with a new covenant, which is mediated by Jesus and accomplished by his death. He refers to the sacrifices performed by the Old Testament priests and says such things as, "The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one..." (Heb. 8:6). Or again, "Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance..." (Heb. 9:15).

The Hebrews writer closes by saying, "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21).

What Hebrews says is important, for it warns us never to think of Jewish people as somehow enjoying a separate track of salvation, as if they are saved only because they are Jews and by being Jews. Some who have taught that God will save the Jews in the last days have talked like this, leading critics of their view to say that they have created two

peoples of God, a heavenly people with a heavenly destiny and an earthly people with an earthly destiny. If they have done that, they are wrong. There is only one people of God, composed both of Jews and Gentiles. The covenant we are considering has nothing to do with a separate people and a separate destiny, only that God will keep his promises to the Jewish people by leading the mass of them to faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior in the final days.

As Paul told Timothy, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

Our Faithful God

My final point is that, therefore, we also are a party to this covenant, if we have believed on Jesus Christ. The Jews are to be brought to faith in the last days. But we stand in that same covenant today, and the attributes of God that have formed the earlier covenants are also for our encouragement. Can't you see that this is how Romans 11 is ending? Paul has been arguing for God's faithfulness to the Jews as being consistent with his faithfulness to us, and now, having shown that "all Israel will be saved," he breaks into praise of God's gracious attributes, since they affect us also.

In these last verses he is going to praise God's mercy, knowledge, wisdom, judgments, and paths, and he will close by saying, "To him be the glory forever! Amen."

When we talk about God's irrevocable covenant, as we have been doing here, and God's irrevocable call, which we will do in our next study, we are speaking about God's immutability. Immutability means that God does not change, and because he does not change he can be counted on.

In what ways does God not change? In his popular book *Knowing God*, English theologian J. I. Packer lists six areas:

1. *God's life does not change.* Created things have a beginning and an end, but God does not. His life is a constant datum. God does not grow old or mature or weaken or grow stronger. God cannot

change for the better, because he is already perfect, and he certainly cannot change for the worse.

2. *God's character does not change.* One of the most repeated passages in the Bible is Exodus 34:6-7, in which God reveals himself to Moses, saying, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." That is what God was like in the days of the Jewish exodus, and that is what he is like today. Sickness, old age, or adverse circumstances can destroy our good traits, but nothing like this ever happens to God. He can be counted on to be as kind, gracious, forgiving (and holy) as he always was.

3. *God's truth does not change.* This means that the truths of the Bible do not change. What we read in the pages of Holy Scripture is as right and true today as ever.

4. *God's ways do not change.* Packer writes: "He continues to act towards sinful men in the way that he does in the Bible story. Still he shows his freedom and lordship by discriminating between sinners, causing some to hear the gospel while others do not hear it, and moving some of those who hear it to repentance while leaving others in their unbelief.... Still he blesses those on whom he sets his love in a way that humbles them, so that all the glory may be his alone. Still he hates the sins of his people, and uses all kinds of inward and outward pains and griefs to wean their hearts from compromise and disobedience___Man's ways, we know, are pathetically inconstant—but not God's."

5. *God's purposes do not change.* The ups and downs of history do not frustrate God or cause him to alter what he has determined beforehand to do. Has he planned to bring many sons and daughters into glory through faith in Jesus? Then he will do it. Has

he purposed to bless Israel in a special way nationally? Then that will be done. What God does in time he has planned in eternity, and what he has planned in eternity is carried out in time.

6. *God's Son does not change.* Perhaps most blessed of all for Christian people, the Lord Jesus Christ does not change. He is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), and it remains true that "he is able to save completely those who come to God through him..." (Heb. 7:25).

When the great protector Oliver Cromwell was dying, he was overcome with spiritual darkness and depression, and in his despair he asked his chaplain, "Tell me, is it possible to fall from grace?"

"No," said his minister. "It is not possible."

"Then I am safe," said Cromwell, "for I know that I was once in grace. I am the poorest wretch that ever lived, but I know that God has loved me."

Do you remember this question from the Heidelberg Catechism?

Question 1: "What is thy only comfort in life and in death?"

Answer: "That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him." That is our God forever! Amen.

Chapter 169.
God's Irrevocable Call

Romans 11:28-29

Do you remember the Greek philosopher Heraclitus? He lived about 2,600 years ago in Ephesus, and it was he who said, "It is impossible to step into the same river twice." Heraclitus meant that life is in a state of constant change. So, although you can step into a river once, step out, and then step in a second time, by the time you have stepped back in the water has flowed on and the river is no longer the same. It is a different river. To Heraclitus and the Greeks who followed him, all of life seemed to be like that—as if everything is changing and it is changing all the time.

"But if that is so," Heraclitus asked, "how is it that things are not in a state of constant chaos?" He answered that life is not chaos because the change we see is an ordered change, and the reason it is ordered and not random is that the mind, reason, or order of God stands behind it.

To the Greek philosophers, God (or reason) was the only fixed point in an otherwise chaotic universe.

The Character of God

Heraclitus was not a Christian, of course. He lived well before the time of Jesus Christ. But if
Heraclitus had lived six or seven hundred years later and had been given an opportunity to read Paul's letter to the Romans, he would have understood our text easily. For what Paul is saying in the closing lines of Romans 11 is that the character and, therefore, also the plans of God do not change, regardless of the way human beings alter or behave.

Anyone who has been studying Romans 11 carefully will be aware that verses 28-32 are a summary of what Paul has been at pains to prove earlier. He has been asking why Jewish people seem to have been rejected by God, why they have turned their backs on the Messiah, and he has answered that it has been for the sake of Gentile conversions. Using the image of a cultivated olive tree and branches from a wild tree, he argued that Jewish branches have been broken off so that wild branches, which represent Gentiles, might be grafted in. Jewish people

have been set aside for a time so that salvation might be extended to all the many peoples of the world.

But this setting-aside is only temporary, for once "the full number of the Gentiles has come in...
all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26). That is, there will be a time of widespread Jewish conversions before the final judgment.

This earlier teaching is summarized in our present text: "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gift and his call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29).

But how can Paul say this? Setting aside the matter of special revelation, what could possibly lead Paul to this conclusion? He could conclude on the basis of the widespread Jewish rejection of the gospel, which he had witnessed, that the Jews were being set aside. He could imagine on the basis of the growing Gentile response that Gentiles were being brought into God's salvation plan. But on what possible basis could Paul suppose that one day the Jews as a people would be saved? There is only one answer. It is the character of God. God is unchanging. Therefore, his plans for the Jews are unchanging, and his call, which puts his plans into action, is irrevocable.

To put this in simple language: God chose the Jews to be his special people, and nothing that has happened since, or will happen, can change that choice or relationship.

So these words are not a reflection upon Paul's missionary experience, still less an expression of his fading hope that his own people might nevertheless somehow be saved eventually. It is a deduction from God's character. That is what Leon Morris is getting when he writes at this point, "God had made promises to Israel, and these promises would be kept. Israel's refusal to accept the gospel did not mean either that the gospel was a failure or that God would not perform all he had promised to his ancient people."

God's Gifts and God's Call

In the last study we looked at one expression of God's faithfulness: the covenant. It is because God is faithful to his covenant that I borrowed the word *irrevocable* from verse 29 and linked it to the word *covenant* in verse 27, where it does not actually occur, and I spoke of "God's Irrevocable Covenant." Here two new ideas are introduced to explain the nature of God's faithfulness: God's gifts and God's call.

What do these words refer to?

The Swiss commentator F. Godet thinks that God's gifts are the moral or intellectual aptitudes of a people. He observes that the Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians each had their own special gifts from God in areas such as science, art, law, politics, industry, and commerce. The Jews received what he called "a higher gift," that is, an aptitude and intuition for holiness. It is doubtful that this is what Paul is thinking of here. In this context, "gifts" is linked to the words call and *covenant,* which means that Paul is thinking of the specific gifts given to the covenant people as part of that relationship.

The true listing of the gifts given to Israel is in Romans 9, which means that the closing verses of this middle section of Romans take us back to the beginning: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all" (Rom. 9:4-5). Paul's mention of the patriarchs in Romans 11:28 itself requires us to think of these verses.

How about the other term, God's call? To what does this refer? Our first instinct is to think of it as God's effectual call, that is, the call of the Holy Spirit that leads the person receiving it to faith. The word was used this way in Romans 8, where Paul wrote, "And those he predestined, he also called" (v. 30).

However, this is probably not the right meaning here. In this verse "call" is virtually synonymous with predestination or election. The meaning is

not that God has called or will call the Jews to saving faith, though Paul is teaching that the mass of Israel will come to faith in the final days, but rather that God has chosen the nation to be a special nation for his purposes and that he will not, indeed cannot, abandon that choice because Israel has rejected the Messiah.

Verse 29 is saying that the adoption, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, the promises, and the patriarchs are Israel's still, regardless of her unbelief, and that the people remain God's covenant people.

But God! When you chose Abraham to be the father of a special people, didn't you know that he would be weak in faith himself? Didn't you know that he would step aside from his high calling and go down to Egypt, where he would be willing even to sacrifice the honor of his wife to save his own skin?

"Yes," says God, "I knew that. But I called him anyway, and my gifts to him and my calling of him were irrevocable."

But God! Surely you knew that the people who came along in the line of Abraham would be unfaithful. You gave them the law through Moses. But even Moses, great as he was, dishonored you by taking your glory to himself. He struck the rock contrary to your command, saying, "Must *we* bring you water out of this rock?" (Num. 20:10). You even kept him from entering the Promised Land as a result. Did you really take all that into account when you called the Jews to be a special people?

"Yes," God replies, "I knew what Moses would do. But my gifts and my call are irrevocable."

But God! What about David? David committed adultery with Bathsheba and even had her husband, Uriah, killed to escape detection. Certainly, if you had known what David would be like, you would have done things differently. Did you really consider David's sin when you set your electing love upon this people?

"Yes," God answers, "I did, and my call is irrevocable."

But God! What about the kings who followed David? And the people who copied the debased morality of those kings? How could you have set upon such people an eternal love, expressed in an irrevocable covenant?

"Your ways are not my ways," says God. "I knew the people would be wicked. Everyone is wicked. 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.' I wrote that, remember. Still I have fixed my covenant love upon these people, and my call is irrevocable. My will for them has not changed."

But God! Surely your call must change in light of the way these people treated Jesus Christ.
Jesus was loving and compassionate. His greatest offense was to be holy and to speak the truth. Yet they rejected him. They hounded him to death and eventually secured his execution on a cross between two thieves. If you had foreseen that, you would never have made the promises you did. Or now, having seen their treatment of Jesus, surely you will repudiate whatever relationship you did have with them. Surely you are going to cast them off forever!

"No," God replies. "I know the end from the beginning. I knew how it would all turn out. Yet, in spite of what they did, I set an irrevocable love upon them."

Our Faithful God

I am not writing this for Jewish people particularly, of course. I am writing these studies for contemporary Christians, who are largely Gentile. So I am concerned with how this affects them. How *does* it affect them? How does it affect you and me?

If we were only concerned with what is usually called prophecy, that is, with what God will be doing one day, there would be little relevance. But that is not the case. As Leon Morris said, this is not an example of Paul's Jewish patriotism, but rather an outworking of his doctrine of

justification. And because he is basing his conclusions on the character of God, everything he emphasizes about God's dealings with the Jews is for us, too. In the previous study we ended by thinking about God's immutability, the fact that God does not change. In this study I want to end by focusing on God's faithfulness. I want to stress that his gifts to you and his calling of you are irrevocable.

A number of years ago, Arthur W. Pink wrote a book in which he discussed seventeen great attributes of God. He expanded that list later, increasing the attributes of God to twenty-five and adding twenty "excellencies" of Jesus Christ. One of the attributes of God he discussed was faithfulness.

In what ways is God faithful? Pink suggested the following:

1. *God is faithful in preserving his people.* We have a phrase for this in theology: the perseverance of the saints. It can be understood in two ways. It can mean that the saints persevere, or it can mean that God perseveres with the saints. Obviously both are true, and the former is true only because the latter also is. That is, the saints persevere only because God perseveres with them. To put it in the language we have been using: The followers of Jesus Christ will be faithful to him because he is faithful to them. God said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5; cf. Deut. 31:6). Jesus told his disciples, "Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

I have often taught that there are four New Testament texts that, more than any others, teach the perseverance of the saints. Two are from the lips of Jesus. Two are from Paul.

The first text is John 6:37-40: "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

The second text is John 10:27-30: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.
My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

The third text is Romans 8:31-39, which we have already studied in detail: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

> *For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The final text is Philippians 1:6. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

These texts teach the perseverance of the saints and assure us that the gifts and call of God are irrevocable.

2. *God is faithful in disciplining his people.* God has called us to be like Jesus Christ, which means that he will do whatever is necessary to conform us to that image. Instruction?
Encouragement? Of course. But also discipline. The Bible says, "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as

a son" (Heb. 12:6; cf. Prov. 3:11-12).

In one of his later writings, Harry Ironside tells of something that occurred early in his ministry. He had been preaching in Fresno, California, and the day came, surprisingly to him, when he was entirely out of money. He had to check out of his hotel, leaving his suitcase at a drugstore to be picked up later. That evening, hungry, having had no supper, he settled himself under a tree on the lawn of the courthouse for the night. He thought of Philippians 4:19, "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." He complained. Why doesn't God do it, then? Why isn't he faithful to his promise?

As Ironside prayed that night, God brought to his mind things about which he had grown careless, and in his meditation God brought him to a spiritual awakening. And, of course, God did provide for his needs. Old friends appeared to provide housing. The meetings went well, and at the end the people took up a collection that helped him get home.

But here is the interesting thing. As he left Fresno, Ironside stopped by the post office, where he found a letter from his father. He wasn't expecting it, so it surprised him. In it his father had written, "God spoke to me through Philippians 4:19 today. He has promised to supply all our need. Some day he may see I need a starving, and if he does, he will supply that." Ironside saw then that God had been putting him through a time of deprivation for discipline, to bring him closer to himself.

Here is the way Arthur Pink sees it: "God... is faithful in what he withholds, no less than in what he gives. He is faithful in sending sorrow as well as in giving joy. The faithfulness of God is a truth to be confessed by us not only when we are at ease, but also when we are smarting under the sharpest rebuke. Nor must this confession be merely of our mouths, but of our hearts also. When God smites us with the rod of chastisement, it is faithfulness which wields it. To acknowledge this means that we humble ourselves before him, own that we fully deserve his correction; and instead of murmuring, thank him for it. God never afflicts without a reason."

3. *God is faithful in glorifying his people.* This truth takes us back to Romans 8, to the chain of saving acts outlined in verses 29 and 30: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

You may remember from the studies in the second volume of this series that Paul's theme in Romans 5-8 is glorification, and his point is that glorification is certain for those whom God has justified. He introduces this at the beginning of chapter 5, and it is the note on which he ends at the conclusion of chapter 8. What is more, Romans 9-11 are about this truth, too, for Paul's entire discussion of God's dealing with the Jews is to answer the objection that we cannot be sure of our final glorified state, since the Jews, who were once God's chosen people, have been cast off.

Paul says, "Not so!" The Jews are not cast off, because God's covenant, gifts, and calling of them are irrevocable. So also in regard to his calling of us. Having been foreknown by God, predestined, called, and justified, we may know that we shall certainly be glorified as well.

Rock of Ages

"You can't step into the same river twice," said Heraclitus. True enough. But you can anchor your boat in the faithfulness of God Almighty and plant your feet on the Rock that nothing in heaven or earth will ever shake. If you do, you will find that God is unchanging. You will find him to be exactly as he was to Abraham and Moses and David and all who have gone before or who will come after you. You will not find him withdrawing his gifts because of some failure in you, or repudiating his calling of you, once you have come to Jesus Christ.

"God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

Arthur Pink wrote, "Unfaithfulness is one of the most outstanding sins of these evil days. In the business world, a man's word is, with rare exceptions, no longer his bond. In the social world, marital infidelity

abounds on every hand; the sacred bonds of wedlock are broken with as little regard as discarding an old garment. In the ecclesiastical realm, thousands who have solemnly covenanted to preach the truth have no scruples about attacking and denying it. Nor can reader or writer claim complete immunity from this fearful sin. How many ways have we been unfaithful to Christ, and to the light and privileges which God has entrusted to us!"

The author concludes, "How refreshing, then, and how blessed, to lift our eyes above this scene of ruin, and behold One who is faithful, faithful in all things, at all times."

Chapter 170.
Mercy for All

Romans 11:30-32

The last verses of Romans 11 before the doxology (vv. 33-36) contain an important insight, namely, that all people are on an equal footing before God. For most of us this does not seem particularly perceptive, because we assume it as part of our cultural heritage. The founding document of the American republic says that "all... are created equal." But we do not really believe it. We believe in equal rights, perhaps. Or that people deserve equal opportunities. But we do not really believe that all people are equal. What we really believe is that some people—we place ourselves in that number—are better than other people.

Where does belief in equality come from? What produces the insight that all really are equal before God? There is only one answer: awareness that all have sinned and that all stand in need of God's mercy. Sin alone lowers everyone to the same needy level, so that mercy alone can lift us to the heights.

That is why Christianity, with its precise understanding of God's mercy, is the only true hope for brotherhood among human beings.

A Significant Summary

In these verses, Paul is beginning to wrap up the third great section of Romans. Verses 28 and 29 have already done this, repeating in summary what Paul developed in verses 11-24, and reminding us that the rejection of Jesus Christ by Israel worked for Gentile blessing and that the blessing of the Gentiles will in time work for Israel's good. That is the point made by the illustration of the cultivated and wild olive trees and their branches.

In the verses considered in this study (vv. 30-32) that same summation is repeated: (1) the disobedience of Israel had led to the showing of mercy to the Gentiles, and (2) the mercy shown to the Gentiles will in time lead to Israel's blessing.

Yet Paul is never merely repetitious, and what is new in this section is an emphasis on mercy. This means that here Paul's summary is extending further back than over chapter 11 alone. It is going all the way back to chapter 9, where the mercy of God was carefully discussed. In that chapter Paul was explaining God's sovereignty in election, asking: "Is God unjust?" "Not at all!" he answers. "For he says to Moses,

> *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.... God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:14-16, 18).

But we have come a long way since Romans 9, haven't we? There, Paul was explaining how mercy accounts for God's saving some and not others. But here in Romans 11, he is thinking of mercy inclusively rather than exclusively. That is, having pursued to the end his teaching about God's historical dealings with the Jewish people and having prophesied a time of future Jewish blessing, Paul observes that in this

way God is showing mercy *to all.* "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (v. 32).

That verse does not teach universal salvation, of course. If it did, it would be contradicting Romans 9. Paul is talking about Jews and Gentiles as groups of people, not as individuals. But he is nevertheless inclusive in his assessment of God's mercy. Although neither Gentiles nor Jews deserve mercy, God is merciful to both. That is the point. And it is this important insight that leads Paul, the formerly self-righteous Jewish patriot and proud Pharisee to regard all human beings as equal before God.

If you are prejudiced against other people in any way, if you think yourself to be superior to them for whatever reason, it is because you do not understand the nature of your sin or God's grace.

The Quality of Mercy

Let's talk about mercy and how it differs from such other qualities of God as goodness and grace.

"Goodness" is a general term, involving all that flows from God: his decrees, his creation, his laws, his providences. It extends to the elect and to the non-elect, though in different ways. "Grace" denotes favor, particularly toward the undeserving. "Mercy" is an aspect of grace, but the unique quality of mercy is that it is shown to the pitiful.

Arthur W. Pink says, "Mercy... denotes the ready inclination of God to relieve the misery of fallen creatures."

A. W. Tozer says, "Mercy is... an infinite and inexhaustible energy within the divine nature which disposes God to be actively compassionate."

Many great Bible texts talk about mercy. When Moses asked to be shown God's glory and God agreed to hide him in a cleft of the rock and cover him with his hand while his glory passed by, God said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have *mercy* on whom I will

have *mercy,* and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exod. 33:19-20, emphasis added). The very essence of God is mercy, according to this passage.

When David sinned by counting the fighting men of Israel and God gave him a choice of punishments, one of which was a plague that God himself would send, David chose the plague, saying, "Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his *mercy is great;* but do not let me fall into the hands of men" (2 Sam. 24:14, emphasis added). This teaches that God is merciful even in his judgments.

Psalm 51:1 measures God's mercy by his love: "Have *mercy* on me, O God, according to your unfailing love" (emphasis added).

Isaiah 55:6-7 promises mercy to anyone who will seek it:

> *Seek the LORD while he may be found;*
> *call on him while he is near.*
> *Let the wicked forsake his way and the*
> *evil man his thoughts.*
> *Let him turn to the LORD, and he will*
> *have mercy on him, and to our God, for*
> *he will freely pardon (emphasis added).*

Ephesians 2:4-5 says, "God, who is *rich in mercy,* made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (emphasis added). Any one of these texts is more than adequate for this or any number of helpful studies on this subject.

Disobedience from All, Mercy to All

But we are now studying Romans 11:30-32, so I want to ask what these verses specifically tell us of God's mercy. I suggest two things.

1. *To appreciate mercy, we must see it against the dark background of sin.* To grasp this point, all we have to do is count words. How many times does the word *mercy* occur in these verses? Answer: It occurs four times, once in verse 30, twice in verse 31, and once in verse 32. Mercy is the dominant idea, which is why we are

examining it at this point. But now let's ask: How many times does "disobedient" or "disobedience" occur? The answer is also four times, twice in verse 30 and once each in verses 31 and 32. John Murray says, "The lesson is obvious. It is only in the context of disobedience that mercy has relevance and meaning."

Arthur Pink points out that one way to understand mercy over against grace or even the goodness of God is to think of God's dealings with the unfallen angels:

He has never exercised mercy toward them, for they have never stood in any need thereof, not having sinned or come beneath the effects of the curse. Yet they certainly are the objects of God's free and sovereign grace. First, because of his election of them from out of the whole angelic race (1 Tim. 5:21). Second, and in consequence of their election, because of his preservation of them from apostasy, when Satan rebelled and dragged down with him one-third of the celestial hosts (Rev. 12:4). Third, in making Christ their Head (Col. 2:10; 1 Pet. 3:22), whereby they are eternally secured in the holy condition in which they were created. Fourth, because of the exalted position which has been assigned them: to live in God's immediate presence (Dan. 7:10), to serve him constantly in his heavenly temple, to receive honorable commissions from him (Heb. 1:4). This is abundant *grace* toward them; but *mercy* it is not.

For God to show mercy, there must first be sin and the misery that attends it. And that is exactly our condition as fallen human beings. Sin abounds! But it is precisely in that context and against that dark and tempestuous background that the mercy of God flashes forth like lightning.

2. *We need mercy if we are to be saved.* This is the second thing that these verses specifically teach. Paul has been writing about the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles, and when he gets to the end of his discussion, as he does here, it is of mercy alone that he is thinking. On what possible grounds could Gentiles hope to be saved apart from God's mercy? There is no other basis. Paul wrote

> to the Ephesians, who were Gentiles, to remind them that before their conversion they "were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). The Gentiles had nothing going for them. If they were to be saved, it had to be by God's mercy alone.

But mercy is no less necessary for the Jews, according to these verses. Unlike the Gentiles, they did have a great deal going for them. They had the gifts Paul mentions to the Ephesians (Eph. 2:12), plus those he spells out more fully in Romans 9:4-5. Yet these spiritual advantages did not save the Jews. They were unbelieving. Therefore, as Paul says, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."

We do not think this way naturally. We think in terms of our own good works and justice. We suppose ourselves to be deserving, which means that we consider ourselves to be better than other people. We are not. Apart from mercy we will perish.

"God Be Merciful"

Earlier in this volume I referred to Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector as an illustration of how, in order to be saved, we must come to God on the basis of his mercy. I return to the same story now, though at greater length, for exactly the same reason.

The story is based on contrasts, and the first is between the Pharisee and the tax collector themselves. We have a bad mental image of Pharisees because of some of the things Jesus said about them, but the people of that day actually thought very highly of the Pharisees. These men were known for their faithful adherence to the law. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and so was Paul. They were among the most honored of their contemporaries.

Moreover, that is the way Jesus presented the Pharisee in his story. The Pharisee prayed, thanking God that he was not like other men. He did

not steal. He was not an adulterer. He fasted twice a week and tithed what he possessed.

It was altogether different with the tax collector. Nobody had any warm feelings for tax collectors, and not only because paying taxes is an unwelcome duty. Tax collectors were collaborators with the unpopular occupying Roman army, and they were hated for it. Moreover, they were allowed to collect all the money they could, keeping whatever was above what Rome demanded, and that caused resentment.

This tax collector knew he was a sinner: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Well, why not? That is exactly what he was. Up to this point everyone who heard Jesus' story would have been right with him. On the one hand, the righteous Pharisee. On the other hand, the sinful tax collector. The first, the center of attention. The other, on the edge of the crowd, where he belonged.

But then Jesus introduced a second contrast, and it was as unexpected and puzzling as the first was acceptable. Speaking of the tax collector, Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:13-14).

What is going on here? Didn't we hear the story right? Or is there perhaps more to the character traits of the Pharisee and the tax collector than we were told. The Pharisee appeared righteous, but perhaps he really was not. Maybe he was a thief on the side or an adulterer or a secret blasphemer of God. And maybe the tax collector was not really so bad. Perhaps we have judged him too harshly. We know at once that this is not the answer. Outwardly and inwardly, the two men were exactly what we know them to be: two sinners, though one was unaware of it. One was a "righteous sinner," the other an "unrighteous sinner." The only difference is that the tax collector *knew* he was a sinner and therefore came to God seeking mercy.

So he found it!

The heart of this story is in the tax collector's prayer. It is one of the shortest prayers in the Bible—only seven words in English, six in Greek—but it is also one of the most profound.

Consider the beginning and the end, eliminating the middle. That is, delete the words "have mercy on" and retain the words "God" and "me, a sinner." These words contain the essential ingredients in all religion—holy God and sinful man—and they express the insight anyone gains when he or she becomes aware of God's presence: God is a holy God. Therefore, to become aware of God in his holiness is to become aware of ourselves in our sin. This is how we know that the tax collector knew God, despite his reputation, and that the Pharisee did not know him. The Pharisee began, "God..." but we know that he was not praying to God since he did not see himself to be a sinner. Actually he was praying to himself. The tax collector *was* praying to God, because he did see himself as a sinner. These two always go together.

Now consider the middle section of the prayer: "have mercy on." This shows that the tax collector was pleading for mercy on the basis of what God has done to provide it. The Greek word used is a verb form of the word for "Mercy Seat" (*hilasterion*), which refers to the covering of the Ark of the Covenant in the Jewish temple. The tax collector's prayer literally means "treat me as a person who comes on the basis of the blood shed on the Mercy Seat as an offering for sins."

Picture the Ark of the Covenant in your mind. It was a wooden box about a yard long, covered with gold and containing the stone tablets of the law of Moses. The lid of this box was the Mercy Seat, constructed of pure gold and with images of cherubim or angels on each end. Their wings went backward and upward, almost meeting over the center of the Ark. God was imagined to dwell symbolically between those outstretched wings. As it stands, it is a picture of judgment. For what does God see as he looks down from between the wings of the cherubim? He sees the law that we have broken. He sees that he must judge sin.

But here is where the Mercy Seat comes in and why it is called the *Mercy* Seat. Upon that covering of the Ark, once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of an animal that had been killed just moments before in the courtyard of the temple. The animal was a substitute, an innocent victim dying in place of those who deserved to die. Now, when God looked down from between the outstretched wings of the cherubim, what he saw was not the law that we have broken, but the blood of the innocent victim. He saw that atonement had been made and that his love was now free to reach out to save anyone who would come through faith in that sacrifice.

This is why I say that the prayer of the tax collector is profound. It was an appeal to mercy, and it understood where mercy could be found.

Moreover, its very form expressed the truth taught by the Ark of the Covenant. That is to say, between "God," whom we have offended, and "me, a sinner," which describes us all, the tax collector placed the Mercy Seat and what it symbolized. His prayer puts it on the horizontal level. The Day of Atonement does it vertically. But it is the same thing. Both precisely express the only way of salvation.

Of course, under the Old Testament system, the sacrifices were a picture of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that was yet to come. They were important. But it was not the death of animals, however many, that actually purged away sin. The true atonement was provided by the Lord Jesus Christ. When the tax collector prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," he was thinking of the animal sacrifices, because Jesus had not yet died. When *we* pray that prayer, we should be thinking of Jesus and the way God in his mercy has provided for our salvation through him.

Debtor to Mercy Alone

Here are three important things to remember about mercy.

1. *You can appeal to mercy.* The right of God to show mercy to whom he will show mercy, and compassion to whom he will show compassion, cannot be challenged. Mercy cannot be compelled. Otherwise it is not mercy. But that does not mean that you cannot

appeal to mercy. You can. The Bible is full of such appeals and says that it is through such appeals that mercy may be found.

2. *If you have received mercy, you must be merciful to others.* Jesus told about a servant who was forgiven a great debt and then prosecuted a man who owed him just a little. The master of the first servant then threw him into jail. The point is that you cannot claim to have been forgiven by God if you are then unforgiving or harsh with other people. The followers of Jesus must be the most merciful of all people.

3. *If you have found mercy, you must make it widely known.* We know that God has mercy on whom he wills to have mercy and compassion on whom he wills to have compassion. God is sovereign. But there is nothing in the Bible that hinders you from saying as clearly and as forcefully as you can that God's very name is Mercy and that he will save all who come to him for it. God has never turned a deaf ear to anyone who asked for mercy. He has never rejected any person who has believed on Christ Jesus.

Come, every soul by sin oppressed, There's mercy with the Lord,
And he will surely give you rest, By trusting in his Word.
Only trust him, only trust him, Only trust him now.
He will save you, he will save you, He will save you now.

Do you believe that? Will you come? If you do, you will find God to be exactly what Paul declares him to be in this passage: the God of mercy who saves many through faith in Jesus Christ.

Part Fifteen: Doxology

Chapter 171.

No One Like God

Romans 11:33-35

Several decades ago, when I was growing up, the evangelical church was very much interested in prophecy. Sermons frequently discussed prophecy, books on prophecy circulated widely, and there were scores of prophecy conferences that were well attended. This was not a bad thing, of course. The Bible contains a great deal of prophecy; it should be expounded along with other material in due course. But there was a negative side to this focus that caused many who grew up in evangelical churches during that period to lose substantial interest in the topic. Those who studied prophecy tended to become so proud of being on the inside track of what God was doing that they disengaged from real life.

What happened was summed up for me by a person who reacted to news about any gloomy political situation by being happy about it. "If things are getting worse, the Lord must be about to come back," is how he explained it to me.

The biblical writers did not react this way. Sad current events caused them to grieve. Even when they were discussing future events, as Paul has been doing in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of Romans, they did not end their discussions by being smug about their superior knowledge but by glorifying and drawing closer to God.

There is no greater example of this than the way in which the apostle Paul ends the third major section of Romans. He has been tracing the ways of God in history and has contributed to our knowledge of those ways by revealing that in the last days God will draw the masses of the Jewish people to faith: "And so all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). Where does this marvelous discussion of God's ways leave Paul? He is not smug about his knowledge of the future. Instead, he is in awe of

God, and his response is to burst forth in the magnificent doxology with which this section ends. Because Paul has been talking about God's mercy, what he does in this section is what Joseph Addison wrote about in his hymn of 1712.

> When all thy mercies, O my God, My rising soul surveys,
> Transported with the view, I'm lost In wonder, love, and praise!

As Paul contemplated the mercies of God, he was so lost in wonder that he composed the doxology similarly, as an outpouring of praise that began:

> *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*
>
> *Romans 11:33*

The Problem in the Church

Following this pattern, I want to close our studies of Romans 11 with a careful treatment of the attributes of God that Paul specifically mentions. But I confess that I have a problem doing so. We will sometimes acknowledge that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and that neither are our ways his ways (cf. Isa. 55:8). But we have to acknowledge here that even the thoughts and ways of Paul are not the same as ours. In our day, what we want to do is jump on quickly to Romans 12 and "get practical," rather than taking time to contemplate the perfections of the deity.

When he was only twenty years old, Charles Haddon Spurgeon began his half-century-long career in London with a sermon on knowing God, in which he argued that "the proper study of God's elect is God." Spurgeon said, "The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the

existence of the great God whom he calls his Father." He argued that thinking about God improves the mind and expands it.

But how many in our day regularly think about God, even in church? It is impossible to know what is going on in another person's mind, of course. But judging by our actions, words, desires, and church programs, I would argue that not one in a hundred churchgoers today actively thinks about God or stands in awe of him as part of an average worship service.

Earlier in this century there was a wonderful Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor in Chicago whose name was A. W. Tozer. He wrote a number of outstanding books that I heartily commend to you, one of which is entitled *The Knowledge of the Holy.* Here is how Tozer saw the situation thirty years ago:

The church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic.

This low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking.

With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words, "Be still, and know that I am God," mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper in this middle period of the twentieth century.

This loss of the concept of majesty has come just when the forces of religion are making dramatic gains and the churches are more

prosperous than at any time within the past several hundred years. But the alarming thing is that our gains are mostly external and our losses wholly internal; and since it is the *quality* of our religion that is affected by internal conditions, it may be that our supposed gains are but losses spread over a wider field.

That is how Tozer saw the situation in his day. But who can suppose that the situation has improved over the last three decades? On the contrary, our addiction to television, entertainment, and the me-centered outlooks of our time has made the situation worse. And the really sad thing is that we are largely unaware of what has happened.

No people ever rise higher than their idea of God. Conversely, a loss of the sense of God's high and awesome character always involves a loss of a people's moral values and even what we commonly call "humanity." We are startled by the utter disregard for human life that has overtaken large segments of the United States. But what do we expect to see when a country like ours openly turns its back on God? We deplore the breakdown of moral standards in the church, even among its most visible leaders. But what do we think should happen when we have focused our worship services on ourselves and our own, often trivial, needs rather than on God?

Tozer said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." But if the full truth be told, many of us hardly think about God at all.

The Nature of God

The problem is not merely our preoccupation with ourselves and with material things, of course. Part of the problem lies with the very nature of God. God is not like us. In fact, God is not really like anything else we can actually experience or know. As a result, there is always something about God that is indescribable, and this makes it hard to think about him.

When we begin to talk about God, we use similes. That is, we compare God to someone or something else, saying, "God is like...." But the closer we get to God and the better we understand him, the less those comparisons work for us, and we find ourselves saying, as Paul does, "Oh, the depths...." "How unsearchable...." And "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

In the book I have already mentioned, Tozer draws attention to Ezekiel's vision of God recorded in the first chapter of his prophecy and to his increasingly inadequate attempts to describe it. Ezekiel was seeing something he had never seen before. So at first he falls back on the language of resemblance: "I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire *looked like* glowing metal, and in the fire was what *looked like* four living creatures" (Ezek. 1:4-5, emphasis added).

The nearer he approaches to the divine throne, the less sure his words become: "Spread out above the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome.... When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, *like* the roar of rushing waters, *like* the voice of the Almighty, *like* the tumult of an army" (vv. 22, 24, emphasis added).

Finally, Ezekiel is standing before the throne of God himself, and after a few attempts to describe what he sees, he says only, "This was *the appearance of the likeness* of the glory of the LORD" (v. 28, emphasis added).

This is why God prohibited the worship of himself by images in the second of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:4-6).

At first glance it seems strange that God should prohibit the worship of himself by images. "What harm can it do?" we might ask. "Don't images merely focus the attention of the worshiper?"

Theologian J. I. Packer says there are two answers to that. First, images dishonor God, for they are always less than he is and therefore obscure rather than reveal his glory. Second, images inevitably mislead the worshiper, for they suggest false ideas by comparison.

Even though God revealed himself to us personally in Jesus Christ, it is surely no accident that Jesus came before the age of photography, movies, or television. So we do not have a picture or electronic image of him. Instead of by pictures, the way God reveals himself—even the way he reveals Jesus to us today—is by the words of Scripture.

The medieval theologians spoke of the *deus absconditus*, meaning "the hidden God." And so God is! God is always partially hidden, and even the parts we see, we see only because God has revealed them to us in the Bible.

The Incommunicable Attributes

One helpful distinction theologians make is between what they call God's communicable attributes and his incommunicable ones.

Communicable attributes refer to characteristics of God that he shares with us in some measure, since we are made in his image—things like knowledge, wisdom, love, and mercy—in fact, the things Paul actually mentions in this doxology in Romans. God is infinitely above us in these things, of course, but we somewhat understand what they are since we share in them on a much lower level. The incommunicable attributes are characteristics of God that he does not share with us, indeed, cannot share, since they are uniquely a part of what it means for God to be God. They involve such things as self-existence, self-sufficiency, and eternality.

We are going to be looking at a few of the communicable attributes as we go on in our study of

Paul's doxology, since he specifically mentions God's wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and paths (or ways). Here it is worth looking at a few of the attributes that are incommunicable. Let's take the three I just mentioned.

1. *Self-existence.* This means that God has no origins, that he has always been and that he owes his existence to nobody. When you and I speak of our existence, we have to say, "I am what I am by the grace of God." But when God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, God said only, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14).

Of course, this is where our problem in knowing God chiefly lies. The way we learn about something is by breaking it down into its constituent parts and then by tracing those parts to their origin. If we can explain how something came to be, we are well on the way to understanding it. God is not subject to that type of analysis. When we analyze things, those things point back to him as their ultimate and only sufficient cause. But God himself points back to nothing. He is existent in himself alone and therefore ultimately is unknowable. God cannot be analyzed and evaluated as created things can be.

2. *Self-sufficiency.* This attribute means that God has no needs and that he therefore depends on no one. Again, we are not like that. We have countless needs—needs for oxygen to breathe, food to eat, clothes to wear, houses in which to live, and other things—and if we are deprived of any one of them, even for a short time, we cease to be. We die. God does not need anything. In himself, he is and has everything he needs.

This runs counter to ideas that many people have about God. Supposing him to be like themselves, they assume that God needs many things, if not to survive, at least to be happy and fulfilled as God. For example, they imagine that at one time God was lonely and that he created men and women to keep him company. They forget that God is a Trinity and that he always had a perfectly fulfilling fellowship in the Godhead.

Other people suppose that God needs worshipers. But if every individual on the face of the earth became an atheist tomorrow, refusing even to acknowledge God's existence, God would be no more deprived by our atheism than the sun would be deprived of light if all of us should become blind.

Still other people suppose that God needs helpers, even suggesting that he created us to help him "get the job done," whatever that is. It is true that God has given us the privilege of doing useful and meaningful work for him. In the Garden of Eden he gave meaningful work to Eve and Adam. In this age of gospel proclamation he has given us the task of being his evangelists and has even called us "fellow-workers" with Jesus Christ. But this does not mean that God needs us. God can manage very well without us and has always done so. That he chooses to use us is due only to his own free and utterly sovereign will.

3. *Eternality.* It is hard to describe in a few word what "eternity" means as an attribute of God, but it has to do with his everlastingness or perpetuity. In other words, it means that God is, always has been, and always will be, and that he is ever the same in his infinite and eternal being.

This has great practical bearing for us, because it means, among other things, that God can be trusted to remain as he has revealed himself to be. In other words, what we read about him in the Bible remains as true of God today as ever it was, and what others before us have found to be true about God we will find to be true also. Since God has loved us in Christ even before the foundation of the world, we can be sure that he is continuing to love us and will do so forever. Since God has purposed all things from before creation, we can be sure that those purposes will be worked out perfectly. Above all, since God will be present at the end, just as he was at the beginning, we can know that he is inescapable and that one day we will have to give him an accounting for what we have done with our lives.

Right Thoughts about God

How do we form right thoughts about God, if God is so hard to know? We must do so on the basis of the Bible's revelation, of course, thinking and reflecting upon what the Bible tells us propositionally. But here are two additional things that may prove practical. In *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer suggests:

1. *Remove from your thoughts limits that would make God small.* That is what we have been doing in this study. We have been trying to break out of our limited world of cause and effect, dependency and time, and have been trying to think of God as self-existent, self-sufficient, and eternal. It is what the biblical writers do again and again.
2. *Remind yourself of the acts of God that are great.* The biblical writers do this when they remind themselves of God's acts of deliverance on their behalf. They remind themselves of how God created the heavens and the earth, how he intervened in the history of Israel to bring his people out of their Egyptian slavery and establish them in their own land, driving out their enemies. We must remember how he sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for our sin and rise again as our triumphant Savior.

Who Is Like God?

In the Old Testament there is a book named after its author, whose name means "Who is like God?" The book is Micah. It is a somber book, because Micah lived in evil days, as all the minor prophets did, and his message is one of divine judgment. The people had sinned. They would not repent, and judgment was certain to come upon them. But Micah is not all about judgment, and toward the end of his prophecy Micah asks the question that his name conveys: "Who is a God like you?" (Mic. 7:18). He answers exactly as Paul answers the same implied question toward the end of Romans 11.

> *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?*
> *You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.*

You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.
You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham,
as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.

Micah 7:18-20

If God were like us, he would never have shown mercy in the first place, for the people of Micah's day (in fact, of any day) did not deserve it. If he were like us, even if he showed mercy at one time, he would have ceased to show mercy later, because the people would have exhausted his patience. But God is not like us! Thank God for that! God is God, and there is no one like him. He is "the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished..." (Exod. 34:6-7).

If God were not like that, there would be no hope for any of us. We would all perish. But he *is* like that, and there is hope. Think about that, and learn to praise him for it.

Chapter 172.
The Perfect Knowledge of God

Romans 11:33

A number of years ago at a Bible conference in upstate New York I gave a series of studies on the attributes of God. The series seemed to be a blessing to the people who were there, and afterward one of the men was talking about it to a friend. He remarked that he had been a Christian for nearly forty years, that he had attended church faithfully all that time. "Yet in all those years I have never heard anyone teach about the attributes of God. I have never even thought about them," he said.

His friend asked, "Who did you think you were worshiping all that time?" Who are *you* worshiping? I do not know what answer the man in my story gave his friend, but if he was like most of us and was honest, he would probably have said, "A god like myself." God is not like us, of course, but we persist in thinking of him as if he were, because we can handle a god who is diminished in that way. We can even dismiss him as irrelevant. The Bible tells us that God rebukes that kind of thinking. God says to those who treat sin lightly, "You thought I was altogether like you. / But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face" (Ps. 50:21).

God also says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, / neither are your ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8). Yet we constantly try to reduce God to our level. And we all do it. It doesn't make any difference how smart we are. Apparently Erasmus, the brilliant Dutch humanist, thought this way, because Martin Luther wrote to him once, saying, "Your thoughts of God are too human."

No One Like God

The very fact that God is not like us is part of the problem, and it would be an insurmountable problem were it not that God has condescended to reveal himself to us.

In the last study we looked at some of God's incommunicable attributes, meaning those characteristics of God that he does not share with us in any way because he cannot: things like self-existence, self-sufficiency, and eternality. Those qualities belong to God alone. Therefore, we can only make the most feeble attempts to understand what they mean, and usually we have to do so by negatives. We have to say things like: God has no origins, God depends on no one, and God had no beginning and will have no end.

On the other hand, there are also what are called God's communicable attributes. These are qualities that God does share with us, and while these, too, are beyond our full understanding, they are nevertheless things we can begin to understand because we possess similar characteristics, though to a lesser degree.

Some of these qualities are found in the doxology that ends Romans 11, particularly verse 33. There Paul writes, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" There are four items in this verse: wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and paths. In this and the following three studies, I propose to look at each of these characteristics, beginning in this chapter with God's perfect knowledge, since it is logically prior to the others. Wisdom flows from knowledge, and God's unsearchable judgments and paths are the outworking of his wisdom.

The Knowledge of God

The unique quality of the knowledge possessed by God is its perfection. That is, God knows all things, and he knows them exhaustively. We also "know" things, but our knowledge is partial and imperfect.

How can we describe God's knowledge? Arthur W. Pink wrote, "God is omniscient. He knows everything; everything possible, everything actual; all events, all creatures, of the past, the present, and the future. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven, in earth, and in hell.... Nothing escapes his notice, nothing can be hidden from him, nothing is forgotten by him.... He never errs, never changes, never overlooks anything."

A. W. Tozer expands this description by adding negatives: "God has never learned from anyone." Indeed, says Tozer:

God cannot learn. Could God at any time or in any manner receive into his mind knowledge that he did not possess and had not possessed from eternity, he would be imperfect and less than himself. To think of a God who must sit at the feet of a teacher, even though that teacher be an archangel or a seraph, is to think of someone other than the Most High God, maker of heaven and earth....

God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all

enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell....

Because God knows all things perfectly, he knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, he is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does he seek information or ask questions.

When we reflect along these lines, we begin to understand why Paul writes naturally but with amazement, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the... knowledge of God." He is admitting that God's knowledge is so much greater than ours that we can only stand in awe of it.

The perfection of God's knowledge is also disturbing, however, if we think about it, which is one reason why people try so hard not to think about God. As long as we are merely thinking about God's knowing about things or other people, the idea of his knowledge is only awesome or even amusing, like our reaction to the response of a group of children at school who were asked whether they thought God understood computers. The majority thought he did not. That's amusing. Of course, God understands computers! Although we know that when we think about it, the subject is not so amusing when we consider that God also knows about *us*—all about us. We do not mind an ignorant God, or a God who forgets. But what are we to do with a God "before whom all hearts are open, all desires known"? Such a God is immensely threatening, which is why we try to banish him from our thinking.

God's Knowledge and Believers

Yet we need to know about God's attributes, including his knowledge. Let me first suggest four things that knowledge of the perfect knowledge of God should do for Christians.

1. *It should humble us.* I think here of Job. God allowed Satan to attack righteous Job to demonstrate that a believer is able to love God solely

for who he is and not merely for the many blessings he gives. So Satan did attack Job, taking away his possessions, killing his children, and eventually attacking even his health. Job was reduced to abject misery, but even in his most wretched state he did not blame God. "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away" was his amazing testimony (Job 1:21).

At this point Job's friends came to see him, and most of the rest of the book consists of their long speeches and Job's answers. Job's friends had divergent points of view, but basically they argued that since God is a moral God and this is a moral universe, bad things do not happen without good reasons. Therefore, Job must have sinned in some way and thus have brought his troubles on himself. Job did not consider himself to be innocent of all sin, of course. But he knew that he had done nothing to deserve what was happening to him. He was right. What he did not know was that his suffering was the focal point of an invisible but important cosmic struggle.

All this time—for thirty-seven chapters—God was silent. But at last, at the very end of the book, God speaks. What do we expect God to say? We expect God to explain things to Job or at least offer him some comfort. After all, Job has been through a lot. We expect God to tell him about Satan's accusations and reveal how Job had been singled out as a righteous man who would trust God even in misery. This is not what we find. Instead, we find God rebuking Job for presuming to think that he could understand God's ways, even if they were explained to him. This is in the form of a lengthy interrogation having to do with God's perfect knowledge as contrasted with Job's ignorance. The interrogation begins:

> *Who is this who darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?*
> *Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.*
> *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?*
> *Tell me, if you understand.*

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?
Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness,
when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, "This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt"?

Job 38:2-11

These are only the first ten verses of God's questioning. It goes on for four chapters—a total of 129 verses, less the five verses that introduce and then sustain the narrative—and at the end Job is completely humbled. He replies to God,

Surely I spoke things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know....
Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

Job 42:3, 6

If we begin to appreciate the perfect knowledge of God and, by contrast, our own pathetic understanding, the first effect it will have on us will be humility, as in Job's case. We will be embarrassed to think that we ever supposed we could contend with God intellectually.

2. *It should comfort us.* It is not only humility that knowledge of the perfect knowledge of God will work in us. We will also find that our knowledge of God's knowledge brings comfort. This is because God also knows us. He knows the worst about us and loves us anyway. Again, he knows the best about us, even when other people do not and instead blame us for things that are not our fault. Earlier in the story, Job expressed his comfort in God's

knowledge of him, saying, "He knows the way that I take; / when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

Do you remember Hagar, Abraham's concubine who gave birth to Ishmael? Early in the story Hagar was so badly mistreated by Sarah, Abraham's wife, that she decided to run away. God appeared to her to say that he knew what she was suffering but that she should return to Sarah and submit to her. As a result of this revelation Hagar gave a new name to God, which is translated best as "You are the God who sees me" (Gen. 16:13). It was a comfort to Hagar to know that God saw her and knew about her suffering.

The second year he was in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached a sermon on that text in which he told of visiting the cell of a man who had died while imprisoned. The cell was down a long winding stair of a castle, where light never penetrated, and it was only as large as the man himself. "Sometimes they tortured him," said Spurgeon's guide. "But his shrieks never reached through the thickness of these walls and never ascended that winding staircase. Here he died, and there, sir, he was buried," he said, pointing to the ground. Yet, said Spurgeon, there was one who did see him and knew the extent of his suffering, and that was God.

If you are in difficult circumstances and no one on earth either sees or cares, remember that God sees and cares and that, if you are a true Christian, he will make it all up to you one day.

3. *It should encourage us to live for God.* One of the greatest chapters in the Bible having to do with the perfect knowledge of God is Psalm 139, a psalm of David. It begins:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.

Psalm 139:1-4

The second stanza remarks that "such knowledge is too wonderful" for David, "too lofty" for him to attain. Then it continues:

> *Where can I go from your Spirit?*
> *Where can I flee from your presence?*
> *If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*
> *If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,*
> *even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*

Psalm 139:7-10

The fourth stanza says that God's knowing gaze penetrates the night and deep darkness; the next acknowledges that God knew the writer even before his birth, when he was in his mother's womb. In all the Bible there is no greater tribute to the perfect knowledge of God in respect to an individual.

But where does this great psalm end? Strikingly, it ends on a practical note, like so many of David's psalms. It ends by David asking God to help him lead a godly life, precisely *because* God knows him so well.

> *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
> *See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

Do you see how this works? We know so very little. We do not even know ourselves. But God knows us. He knows our weaknesses and our strengths. He knows our sins and our aspirations toward godliness. He knows when isolation will help us grow strong but also when we need companionship to stand in righteousness. He knows when we need

rebuking and correcting but also when we need encouragement and teaching. If anyone can "lead me in the way everlasting" it is God. Moreover, since I know he knows me and wants to help me, I can be encouraged to get on with my Christian living.

4. *It should help us to pray.* Jesus taught this in the Sermon on the Mount when he encouraged his followers to pray to God confidently, expecting answers. "When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:7-8). This is then followed by what we call the Lord's Prayer, a model prayer consisting of just fifty-two words.

God's knowledge of what we need is so perfect that he often answers even before we pray to him. "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear," said God through his prophet Isaiah (Isa. 65:24).

God's Knowledge and Unbelievers

Thus far I have been speaking to Christians, whose sins have been judged in Jesus Christ. They can say thankfully, as Paul does in Romans, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the... knowledge of God." But I cannot leave this subject without applying it also to those who are not Christians. If you are not yet a believer, let me remind you that you have sinned and that you have sinned in the face of God. You have sinned knowingly, willfully, brazenly, and repeatedly. God is a holy God. How do you suppose you will be able to escape his judgment on the day when you stand before him? "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13).

Do not delude yourself on this point. God sees you, and he will punish your sin. After Adam and Eve sinned, they tried to hide in the shrubbery of the Garden of Eden, but the bushes were not dense enough to hide them from the eyes of God. No human eye saw Cain murder his brother, but God saw it and said, "Your brother's blood cries out to me

from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). Achan stole a wedge of gold and a beautiful set of Babylonian clothing, but God saw his theft and brought it to light, and Achan's judgment followed (Josh. 7). Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church, but God revealed their deception and they were struck dead (Acts 5:1-13). The Bible says, "You may be sure that your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23).

What will you do in the day of God's judgment when your sins will be read out? "How does God know *that?"* you will ask. "And *thai?* And *that?* I had almost forgotten it myself." On that day you will be abased, confounded, speechless, and overwhelmed, as God unfolds the records of your sinful past life, page after page and paragraph after paragraph.

"Stop!" you will cry. But it will not stop until every sinful thought, every evil deed, every curse, every theft, every lie, every neglect of what you should have done, is read out and justly judged.

I counsel you: Do not wait for that day. Jesus died so that sinners just like you might be saved from judgment. The way to escape God's judgment is to come to Jesus, to believe on him, trust him, follow him. I tell you on the authority of God's Word that if you believe on Jesus Christ and truly trust him, "you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

Chapter 173.
The Profound Wisdom of God

Romans 11:33

Not long ago I was returning to Philadelphia from a speaking engagement in Toronto, and while I was waiting for the plane to take off so I could put down the tray table and do some work, I picked up the airline's monthly news magazine and read an article on Pinehurst, North Carolina. It seems that Pinehurst is a golfer's paradise. The main country club has seven courses, but there are more than two dozen other courses scattered about. Over the years, Pinehurst has hosted such celebrities as the Rockefellers, Roosevelts, Crosbys, and Swansons, and

many golf greats like Sam Snead, Arnold Palmer, and Jack Nicklaus. Pinehurst is also a ninety-seven-year-old village with about five thousand residents.

I was struck by what one resident had said about the place: "People who don't know Pinehurst ask what it's like, and you can't give them an answer. We as human beings like to compare things, but there's no comparison for this place. It's like no other place in the world. That's what makes it special." But what is *God* like?

You see the problem at once. Unlike Pinehurst—which, in spite of such public-relations statements as the one I just cited, does have places to which it may actually be compared—God is incomparable. That is, he cannot really be compared with anything. This is preeminently true of his incommunicable attributes, things such as God's self-existence, self-sufficiency, and eternality. But it is also true even of his communicable attributes, those qualities that he shares with us in some fashion. One of these is knowledge, which we looked at in the last study. We, too, have knowledge, but because God's knowledge is perfect, it is infinitely greater and infinitely superior to ours. So we speak of him as being omniscient, as knowing all things. God not only knows all things that were or are; he also knows all that could possibly be. That is, he knows possibilities and potentialities as well as actualities.

Another communicable attribute that is also infinitely above and beyond us is God's wisdom.

The Wisdom of God

What do we mean when we say that God is wise or all-wise? We mean that God is omniscient, of course, since God could not be all-wise unless he was all-knowing. But wisdom is more than mere knowledge, more even than total or perfect knowledge. A person can have a great deal of knowledge—we call it "head knowledge"—and not know what to do with it. He can know a great deal about a lot of things and still be a great fool. And there is also the matter of goodness. What about that? Without morality or goodness, wisdom is not wisdom. Instead, it is

what we call cunning. Clearly, wisdom consists in knowing what to do with the knowledge one has and in directing that knowledge to the highest and most moral ends.

Charles Hodge says that God's wisdom is seen "in the selection of proper ends and of proper means for the accomplishment of those ends."

A. W. Tozer wrote, "Wisdom, among other things, is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve those ends by the most perfect means. It sees the end from the beginning, so that there can be no need to guess or conjecture. Wisdom sees everything in focus, each in proper relation to all, and is thus able to work toward predestined goals with flawless precision."

J. I. Packer says the same thing but wisely emphasizes goodness:

Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fullness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariably wise. "His wisdom ever waketh," says the hymn, and it is true. Wisdom, as the old theologians used to say, is his *essence*, just as power and truth and goodness are his *essence*—integral elements, that is, in his character.... Omniscience governing omnipotence, infinite power ruled by infinite wisdom, is a biblical description of the divine character.

As soon as we begin to think along these lines, we see at once why our human wisdom does not begin to compare with God's and why Paul can say, as he does in writing to the Corinthians, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:20-21).

The Wisdom of God in Our Salvation

Paul's words take us a step further in understanding God's wisdom, however. For as soon as Paul speaks of God's wisdom as exceeding human wisdom, he thinks of the gospel—since it is there above all that God's perfect wisdom is seen. And that is what we have at the end of Romans 11, too. What draws out Paul's awe at the "riches of [God's] wisdom" is not the wisdom God displayed in the ordering of creation, as wonderful as that may be, but rather his wisdom in saving sinners such as you and me.

And I would say this: If at this point you are not standing in awe of the depth of the riches of God's manifold wisdom in salvation, as Paul was, you have not even begun to understand the first eleven chapters of this letter. Let me show you what I mean.

1. *The wisdom of God in justification (Rom. 1-4).* The first main section of Romans includes an introduction to the letter (Rom. 1:1-17), an analysis of man's sin (Rom. 1:18-3:20), a statement of the gospel (Rom. 3:21-31), and a proof of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith from the Old Testament (Rom. 4:1-25). The central portion is Paul's statement of the gospel, and the central passage in that is Romans 3:25-26, where Paul writes, "God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement.... to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

Let me illustrate the meaning of these verses by a story. Early in this century, a society for atheism produced a tract in which the life stories of some of the Old Testament heroes were related in lurid detail. One page told the story of Abraham, pointing out that on two occasions he had been willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife to save his own life. Yet the Bible calls Abraham "a friend of God." After pointing this out, the tract asked: What kind of a God is he who can be friends with a cowardly man like Abraham?

The next page told the story of Jacob. Jacob was a cheat. He cheated his brother out of his inheritance. Yet God condescended to refer to himself

by the name of Jacob ("the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"). The tract asked: What kind of God is he who can identify with a scoundrel like Jacob?

Next came Moses. Moses was a great leader and lawgiver, but early in his life Moses had killed a man and buried his body in the sand lest his deed be discovered. Yet God spoke to Moses face to face and called him "my servant." What kind of God could speak face to face with a man who was a murderer?

The last of the atheists' examples was David, their chief witness against God's character. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Then, when Bathsheba was discovered to be with child by David, David arranged the death of her husband so he could marry Bathsheba and conceal his sin. Yet David is called "a man after God's own heart." The atheists asked: What kind of a heart must God have if David, the adulterer and murderer, was a man who was after it? According to the atheists' reasoning, the mere existence of these stories is sufficient to prove either that God does not exist or that, if he does exist, he does not have a character worth admiring.

The interesting thing about this tract is that the atheists had a good point and that Paul acknowledges its partial validity in Romans 3. They were saying that Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David were sinners, and they were entirely right to do so. In fact, these men were far greater sinners than the atheists imagined, for their hearts were "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9). It could be said of them, as Paul wrote of the human race in general, that

> *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God....*
> *there is no one who does good, not even one.*
>
> *Romans 3:10-12; cf. Psalm 14:1-3*

What these men deserved from God was hell. Yet for centuries, instead of sending these depraved and godless characters to hell, God had been

saving them, and others like them.

How could God do this? I do not mean: Did God have the power to do it? Of course, he did. God is all-powerful. Nor do I mean: Shouldn't God want to do it? We can understand how God might want to save sinners. After all, we ourselves might choose to be merciful to those who actually deserve condemnation. But that is not the point. My question has to do with God's justice. It means: How could God save such sinners and at the same time remain a just and holy God? To use Paul's language, how could he be both "just and the one who justifies" the ungodly? Since God was justifying the ungodly, it would seem that for centuries there was something like a shadow cast over the good name of God.

Although this puzzle is beyond the wisdom of mere men and women, it was not beyond the wisdom of God. Thus it was that in the fullness of time "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Or, to go back to the text in Romans, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement... to demonstrate his justice at the present time." This means that God satisfied the claims of his justice by punishing the innocent Jesus for our sins. Jesus bore the wrath of God in our place. Thus, the demands of God's justice were fully met and, justice being satisfied, the love of God was then free to reach out, embrace, and fully save the sinner.

Who but God could think up such a solution to the sin problem? None of us could have done it. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom... of God!" God suited the most perfect means to the most desirable of ends, and so he saves sinners like ourselves.

2. *The wisdom of God in sanctification (Rom. 5-8).* The next section of Romans discusses the permanent nature of salvation, embracing the sinner's need for sanctification. How is the wisdom of God revealed in this area? We have seen that the justification discussed in Romans 1-4 is provided by the work of Christ, which means that it is not of ourselves. It is of grace. But if that is so, what is to stop a justified person from

indulging in his or her sinful nature, since the person's salvation has already been secured by Christ's work? Why should we not continue to sin? In fact, why should we not "go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (Rom. 6:1).

Here we are caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either salvation must be by works, which destroys grace; besides which, no one would be saved, since none can provide sufficient good works. Or else, if salvation is of grace, then we must be free to sin greatly.

God solves this problem by showing us that we are never justified apart from being regenerated or being made alive in Christ. This means that Christians have been given a new nature, and this new nature, being the very life of Jesus Christ within, will inevitably produce good works corresponding to the character of God. In fact, this is the only sure proof of our having been saved by him.

Let's look at this another way. Paul writes of our being joined to Christ in what theologians call "the mystical union. "Just as we have been joined to Adam by our natural descent from him, so that when Adam sinned we sinned and when Adam was judged by the penalty of death for sin we, too, were judged, so also, having been joined to Christ, we are now justified by his work and have been made spiritually alive in him. If we have been truly saved, we are different people than we were before. Moreover, since this is the work of God and not our work, it means that we cannot undo it and so somehow go back to being what we were before. Since we cannot go back, the only way we can move is forward. Paul's way of saying this is: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).

Here is the way Romans 8:1-4 puts it: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." This means that salvation is utterly of grace. But listen to what follows. "And so he condemned sin in sinful

man, *in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit"* (emphasis added).

Who but God could think up a gospel like that? We would never do it, because we do not naturally hold grace and works together. If we emphasize morality, as some persons do, we begin to think that we can be saved by our good works and so strive to do it. We repudiate grace. But if, on the other hand, we emphasize grace, knowing that we cannot possibly be saved by our inadequate and polluted works, we have a natural tendency to do away with works entirely and so slide into Antinomianism. If we hold to grace, we repudiate works, and if we hold to works, we repudiate grace. But God has devised a gospel that is entirely and completely of grace and yet produces the most exceptional works in those who are saved.

No wonder Paul stands in awe of "the depth of the riches of the wisdom... of God" and calls God's judgments "unsearchable" and "his paths beyond searching out" (Rom. 11:33).

3. *The wisdom of God displayed in human history (Rom. 9-11).* The third main section of Romans is concerned with the acts of God in the flow of historical events. As Paul describes it, the problem is that God made special salvation promises to the Jewish people, and yet, in spite of these promises, the majority of the Jews are not responding to the gospel. Does this indicate that the purposes of God have failed? And what about the Gentiles? There are far less promises for them. Yet in Paul's day the Gentiles seemed to be responding to the apostles' preaching. Does this mean that God has rejected the Jews in favor of the Gentiles? If he has, isn't that wrong? And doesn't it destroy the doctrine of the believer's eternal security? Doesn't it mean that God is fickle?

Paul's answer is a magnificent theodicy in which he justifies the ways of God with men, showing that God has rejected Israel for a time in order that his mercy might be extended to the Gentiles, but adding that Gentile salvation will provoke Israel to jealousy and so in time bring the Jewish people to faith in their Messiah.

Since this is the meaning of history, these chapters are a magnificent exploration of the wisdom of God in the ordering of space/time events. Here is how F. Godet, one of the greatest expositors of Romans, puts it: Never was survey more vast taken of the divine plan of the world's history. First, the epoch of primitive unity in which the human family forms still only one unbroken whole; then the antagonism between the two religious portions of the race, created by the special call of Abraham: the Jews continuing in the Father's house, but with a legal and servile spirit, the Gentiles walking in their own ways. At the close of this period, the manifestation of Christ determining the return of the latter to the domestic hearth, but at the same time the departure of the former. Finally, the Jews, yielding to the divine solicitations and to the spectacle of salvation enjoyed by the Gentiles as children of grace; and so the final universalism in an infinitely higher form [than] the original unity.... The contrast between the Jews and Gentiles appears therefore as the essential moving spring of history. It is the actions and reactions arising from this primary fact which form its key. This is what no philosophy of history has dreamt of and what makes these chapters... the highest theodicy.

Who could devise a plan of that scope for world history? We could not do it: We cannot even understand it apart from the biblical revelation, and even that is difficult for us. But it is not beyond "the depth of the riches of the wisdom... of God."

God's Wisdom and Ours

I said at the beginning of this study that the wisdom of God is so much superior to our wisdom that it may hardly be compared to it. Yet I do not want to minimize the need for us on our part to cultivate wisdom. I want to close on that note.

The Bible has much to say about wisdom. The first nine chapters of Proverbs are a sustained exhortation to us to seek this gift. But there is other wisdom literature in the Old Testament (Job, Ecclesiastes), and the New Testament also makes much of wisdom. Ephesians 5:15-17 says, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,

making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." Colossians 4:5 says, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity." James, the Lord's brother, promises, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

We are to seek wisdom, then. But where? How may wisdom be found? First, we must begin with reverence for God. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Second, we must labor to know God's Word, the Bible. The psalmist wrote, "Your commands make me wiser than my enemies" (Ps. 119:98), and Paul urged his young companion Timothy to continue in his study of the God-breathed Scriptures, since they "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

If we really believed that God is all-wise and if we really wanted to be wise ourselves, we would do this. But the problem is that we do not really believe in God's wisdom. Martin Luther once said, "We are accustomed to admit freely that God is more powerful than we are, but not that he is wiser than we are. To be sure, we say that he is; but when it comes to a showdown, we do not want to act on what we say."

From our perspective, the workings of God are irregular, and we like events to run like a train on fixed timetables and along predictable tracks. Because they do not, we are always thinking of how we would be able to do things better. What this means is that in the final analysis we do not trust God to order both the ends and the means to them. How foolish, when in the matter of salvation God has ordered the ends and the means to that end so perfectly! That is a far more complicated matter than the details of our little lives. So we need to repudiate our folly, seek wisdom in the Bible, where alone it may be found, and then seize every opportunity to live for and witness to our all-wise God and heavenly Father.

Chapter 174.
The Unsearchable Judgments of God

Romans 11:33

Once, when I was reflecting on the purpose of good sermons, I jotted down the following: (1) the chief end of a sermon is to glorify God; (2) it should be faithful to the Bible; (3) it must say something worth saying; (4) it should say it well; and (5) it should be helpful to those who listen to it. Some sermons achieve those objectives better than others, of course, and some subjects

lend themselves to one goal better than another. But I do not know of any subject that lends itself to each of those goals better in sermon form than the doctrine of the divine decrees.

The "decrees" have to do with God's ordering of everything that happens, a truth that is clearly of great importance. Yet it is something hardly mentioned by contemporary preachers.

The Westminster divines were aware of this truth and valued it highly. In fact, the Westminster Confession of Faith deals with the subject early in the document, in the third chapter,

immediately after the chapters on the Bible and the Trinity. It begins, "God from all eternity, did, by his most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established" (par. 1).

Judgments and Decrees

The reason I am talking about God's decrees is that this is the probable meaning of the word *judgments* in the second sentence of Romans 11:33. It occurs in the sentence "How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"

The Greek word here is *krimata*. It is generally used in the sense of God's judicial decisions, that is, God's judgments on the wicked. Godet, for one, thinks that this is what it refers to here. But the word is sometimes also used of decisions or determinations, especially in its verbal form (cf.
Rom. 14:13; 1 Cor. 2:2; 7:37; 11:13; 2 Cor. 2:1; Titus 3:12), which fits the context better. Charles Hodge explains the broader usage by saying, "As of old, the ruler was also the judge—to judge often means to rule—[therefore] the same word is used for the decisions of the judge and the decrees or ordinances of the ruler."

The fact that "judgments" occurs in parallel with "paths"—or "ways," KJV—also suggests that Paul is thinking of the acts of God generally and not simply of judicial judgments.

Besides, this is the direction of the apostle's thought in these verses. Paul is marveling at the nature of God's ways. He begins with praise of God's knowledge, which is intuitive and infinite. Wisdom is a step beyond knowledge. It is the ability to perceive the proper, best, and most perfect means to achieve God's perfect ends. Still, at this point knowledge and wisdom are only potentialities. It is only when we get to the next step that the potentialities become actualities, as God's wisdom expresses itself in his decrees, and his decrees determine the path his decisions actually take in human history.

The Nature of God's Decrees

Let's take a moment to think about the nature of God's decrees. What are they like? How do they differ from decisions *we* might make? And why is it that Paul stands in such awe of them? Here are seven things to bear in mind.

1. *The decrees are for God's glory.* You and I do not usually think this way. We think first of our needs, and even when we are thinking in terms of biblical theology, we think first in terms of our salvation and our happiness rather than of God's glory. The Bible is different at this point. Let me ask three questions:

Why did God create the heavens and the earth? We answer: To give us a beautiful environment in which to live and work. The Bible says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; / the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps. 19:1).

Why did Jesus Christ come into the world? We answer: To save us from our sins. True enough. But the greater answer was given by Jesus himself when he prayed, saying, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

What will the saints be saying when they stand before the throne of God in heaven? We suppose that we will be praising God for being so good to us, and we probably will. But the Bible has them saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb / be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).

Do you understand what I am saying? Most of us are hopelessly self-centered and subjective. But the universe and all that happens in it is first of all for God's glory, and not primarily for us, though we benefit from it and God does also have our well-being in view. Surely that is why the doxology in Romans 11 ends as it does. It does not end with man. Rather it ends with God: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. / To him be the glory forever! Amen" (v. 36).

2. *The decrees are one.* I have been speaking of the "decrees" (plural) of God, because we live within the flow of historical events and can only think of God's acts in sequence. But the Westminster Confession of Faith is closer to the biblical way of speaking when it titles the chapter to which I referred earlier: "Of God's Eternal Decree" (singular). The word *decree* is singular because God does not see things in sequence, as we do, but rather sees all things as a whole and from the beginning. Besides, what God foresees is only what he has foreordained or planned.

That is why we read in Psalm 2, "I will proclaim the decree [singular] of the LORD" (v. 7). Or in Romans 8, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called

according to his purpose [singular]" (v. 28). Or in Ephesians 3, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose [singular] which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 10-11). Or in Acts 2, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose [singular] and foreknowledge" (v. 23a).

Charles Hodge wrote in his *Systematic Theology*, "It is inconsistent with the idea of absolute perfection, that the purposes of God are successive, or that he ever purposes what he did not originally intend; or that one part of his plan is independent of other parts. It is one scheme, and therefore one purpose."

3. *The decrees are eternal.* To think of any of God's decisions as having been made in time is to suppose that some new circumstance, unforeseen by God, has occurred and that God therefore finds it necessary to accommodate himself to it. This would mean that God does not know everything perfectly, and it would make circumstances more powerful than God, since in some form or another they would be dictating to him. If such were the case, God would not be God, and we would be back in paganism, with its impotent and very human gods and goddesses.

The Bible teaches something very different when it says that believers were chosen in Christ "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4), and speaks of Jesus as the Lamb "chosen before the creation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20). It follows, says Hodge, that "history in all its details, even the most minute, is but the evolution of the eternal purposes of God."

4. *The decrees are wise.* We have already seen how this is so, for we have seen how God's perfect wisdom issues in what he does. This is preeminently the case in salvation matters. It is what I focused on in the last study, following Paul's thought in Romans 1-11. But the wisdom of God's decrees is also evident in every creative act and every historical determination God makes. The psalmist

rightly declared, "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all..." (Ps. 104:24).

5. *The decrees are free.* Our purposes are also free, even when formed under the influence of other minds or circumstances. It is why we insist on free will. The reason why men and women do not seek God (Rom. 3:11) is because they do not want to, not because they are physically incapable of it. But God's freedom is infinitely above our own. We are free, yet our freedom is within a framework of space/time limitations. In God's case, his will determines the framework. So it is correct to say that he is exalted above all *ab extra* influence, that is, above all influence from without.

Arthur W. Pink expressed this when he wrote, "God was alone when he made his decrees. He was free to decree or not to decree, and to decree one thing and not another. This liberty we must ascribe to him who is supreme, independent, and sovereign in all his doings."

This freedom of God in regard to his decrees is taught in the section of Isaiah from which Paul quotes in Romans 11:34. The full passage says,

> *Who has understood the mind [Spirit] of the LORD,*
> *or instructed him as his counselor?*
> *Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, or*
> *who taught him the right way?*
> *Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him*
> *the path of understanding?*
>
> *Isaiah 40:13-14*

6. *The decrees are absolute and unconditional.* It follows from the fact of God's perfect freedom that his decrees are all also absolute and unconditional. Hodge adds the word *immutable.* This means that what God determines to do is not suspended upon any condition that may or may not come to be, or upon any act that you or I may or may not do. God is infinite in knowledge and perfect in power. Therefore, nothing can arise to cause him to do things

differently or thwart his design. The psalmist says, "The plans of the LORD stand firm forever, / the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:11). James tells us that God "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). God says, "My purpose will stand, / and I will do all that I please" (Isa. 46:10b).

Some complain that if the decrees of God are absolute and unconditional, we cannot speak of free will and responsibility on the part of men and women. But that is not correct. It would be true if (1) God and man were on the same level, operating as equals, and (2) the choices we make were not determined by our sinful natures. Neither is the case. We decide as we do because we are sinners, which means we are responsible. God exercises his will toward us in this area by allowing sin to operate, just as he also exercises his will in other cases by intervening to save us from sin and turn us away from such actions. As to the first condition, we are not on God's level, which means that while our choices embrace only our own choices, God's decrees embrace not only his will but also the contrary wills of sinful and rebellious subjects.

7. *The decrees are effective.* Theologians make a distinction between God's efficient decrees, that is, what he specifically wills, and God's permissive decrees, that is, what he does not specifically will himself but nevertheless permits to come to pass. The entrance of sin into the world and all sinful acts are in the latter category. We say that God does good but permits evil. He is the direct author of one, though not the other. This is a valid distinction, but it has nothing to do with the certainty of coming events. Whatever God ordains, whether actively or passively, is certain.

Election and Reprobation

Many years ago, B. B. Warfield, the great Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary (1887-1921), wrote an article for *The Presbyterian Banner on* the Westminster Confession's chapter on "God's Eternal Decree." Like Paul, Warfield marveled at the doctrine. But he also marveled at the confessional

statement, praising the sparse yet precise language with which the authors set forth the doctrine. Religiously, the confession assures us that despite all contrary appearances the arm of God is stretched out beneath us to uphold us and teaches that everything does work for good for those who love God. Philosophically, the confession affirms that the universe has a divine purpose and that nothing will thwart what God is doing.

But what Warfield most marveled at is that the confession does not bog down in fruitless speculation about how God's decree operates in human life, particularly in regard to free will, but instead passes directly to the way the decree operates for our salvation.

This is true if you look at the confession. There are eight paragraphs that deal with God's decree. The first two occupy only ten lines in my edition; they cover the points I have made at greater length in this study. But from that point on, the chapter turns to the matter of election and the accompanying steps that accomplish and then assure our salvation. The confession says:

Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto: and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. [pars. v, vi]

The final paragraph encourages us to handle the truth of predestination with care, knowing nevertheless that it affords "matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel" (par. viii).

Two Profitable Questions I close by asking two questions.

First, isn't this how Paul has himself been handling the doctrine of God's decrees in Romans 911? He has handled it with humility, confessing at the end of his discussion the unsearchable nature of God's judgments and the untraceable pattern of his paths. He has also ended with "praise, reverence, and admiration" for God, who has designed and accomplished such a marvelous salvation. It is why Paul is praising him.

We must do the same. We must confess our inability to probe the depths of God's infinitely wise decrees. Like the nineteenth-century hymnwriter Ray Palmer (1858), we may say:

> *Lord, my weak thought in vain would climb*
> *To search the starry vault profound; In vain would wing her flight sublime To find creation's utmost bound.*
>
> *But weaker yet that thought must prove*
> *To search thy great eternal plan,*
> *Thy sovereign counsels, born of love, Long ages ere the world began.*

But we may rejoice in God's decrees, too, as Palmer also did,

> Be this my joy, that evermore
> Thou rulest all things at thy will;
> Thy sovereign wisdom I adore,
> And calmly, sweetly, trust thee still.

No one who knows the reality and joy of salvation can do less.

My second question is this: Despite the way God's eternal decree puzzles us and the little about it we truly understand, would we really wish it to be otherwise? Would we prefer that our salvation depended on something we did or decided, rather than on God's decree and choice? Here is the way Warfield asked these questions at the end of the essay I referred to earlier:

Do we really wish it to be true that no man in the eternal counsel of God is particularly predestined unto eternal life? That no man who is predestined unto life is unchangeably predestinated unto eternal life? Do we really wish it were dependent on our own strength whether we ourselves enter into life, or having entered, abide in life? Do we really wish that it were only a vague and uncertain number—it may be many, it may be few; experience only can decide—who are predestinated unto eternal life? Do we really care little or nothing whether it be the everlasting arms or merely our own weak arms that we rest on in our Christian life? Do we really care nothing whether we can make our own that noble paean which the apostle sings at the close of the eighth chapter of Romans, the keynote of which is the great declaration that if God is for us nothing can be against us?... Or do we really fancy that we can believe all these things are really ours, if we hold it false or doubtful that God's people are particularly and unchangeably designed to glory and their number is certain and definite and cannot be diminished—in accordance with our Savior's words that they shall never perish, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand —that they have been given him of the Father, and he will lose none of them, but raise them up at the last day?

I do not think any of us really want that, or would if we stopped to think about it clearly. So let's rejoice instead, knowing that "God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass."

Even more important, let us say with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"

Chapter 175.
The Amazing Ways of God

Romans 11:33

Because God did "unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass," he obviously has ordained a path for us to walk in. But we have trouble with that path because (1) we are not always convinced that it is ordained; (2) we do not know where it is going; and (3) it does not always work out as we believe it should.

God's Painful Paths

Let me tell you about Elisabeth Elliot, who as a young woman went to the jungles of Ecuador to be a missionary. After studying Spanish for a year, she was invited to work with two other lady missionaries who were trying to reduce the language of the Colorado Indians to writing so they could translate the Bible into it. Elisabeth Howard—for that was her name then—prayed for an informant, someone who knew the Colorado language and would help her learn it, and the Lord supplied what seemed to be a perfect individual. His name was Macario. He was bilingual in both Spanish and Colorado, and he was delighted to have the interpreter's job. One day, shortly after they had begun the work, Macario was murdered. It was a pointless, terrible setback to what was apparently a sacrificial and spiritual endeavor. But there it was! No explanation. It was simply something that God, for whatever reason, had allowed to happen.

Elisabeth went on with the work, and at the end of a year she had accumulated thousands of vocabulary cards and done a preliminary analysis of the Colorado language. She had reduced it to a phonemic alphabet and was teaching the other two missionaries to use it. One day when she was away, all her materials were stolen. The women prayed about it, of course, but the materials were never recovered. The year's work was lost, gone. It had been for nothing.

The next stage in this story is better known to us. Elisabeth Howard married Jim Elliot, who in a similar manner had been trying to rebuild a missionary outpost called Shandia station but who had a year's work washed down the river one night by a surprise flood. The couple worked with the Quichua Indians. After only twenty-seven months of marriage, Jim Elliot was speared to death by Auca Indians, whom he and four missionary companions had been trying to reach with the gospel. Again, it was all so pointless and painful. It was "unsearchable... beyond tracing out."

And that was not all. After some years Elisabeth married Addison Leitch, a former president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. But not long after, he died slowly and painfully from cancer.

What is Elisabeth Elliot's testimony? She says, "The experiences of my life are not such that I could infer from them that God is good, gracious and merciful necessarily. To have one husband murdered and another one disintegrate body, soul and spirit, through cancer, is not what you would call a proof of the love of God. In fact, there are many times when it looks like just the opposite. But my belief in the love of God is not by inference or instinct. It is by faith. To apprehend God's sovereignty working in that love is—we must say it—the last and highest victory of the faith that overcomes the world."

Secret Things and Things Revealed

This is exactly what we are dealing with in Romans 11:33, of course, a text that has already occupied us for three studies. It tells us that God's wisdom and knowledge are perfect and that his decrees and paths, which flow from that wisdom and knowledge, are beyond tracing out.

But this is a truth we find hard to come to grips with, as I said at the beginning. In the last study we were looking at God's judgments or decrees. We explored the meaning of the "eternal decree" together, and at the end we were left with two results: (1) *humility* at our inability to comprehend God's decrees, and (2) *awe* of them, coupled with *praise* of

God for his greatness. That response carries over into the fourth of the items cited and to which we come now, God's "paths."

"Judgments" refers to God's decrees, flowing from his infinite knowledge and perfect wisdom. "Paths" refers to the course these judgments actually take in human history.

Yet the two terms are closely parallel, and what Paul says of them is exactly parallel. He says that God's judgments "cannot be searched to the bottom" (the Greek word is *anexereunêtos*) and that his paths "cannot be followed to the end" (the Greek is *anexichniastos*).

Paul does not mean that we can never know anything about God's ways, particularly since he has just been explaining some of them. What he means is that God's ways cannot be figured out by us apart from revelation.

Some things God has revealed. That is why we know he has a plan and that events do not happen simply by accident. Paul says, "'No eye has seen, / no ear has heard, / no mind has conceived / what God has prepared for those who love him'—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:9-10). But God does not reveal all things, particularly the detailed circumstances or events of our lives, and in these areas we must live by faith in his sovereign and loving purposes, as Elisabeth Elliot does. The Bible says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever..." (Deut. 29:29).

God's Footprints

There is a very interesting image involved in the single Greek word rendered "beyond tracing out." This word, *anexichniastos*, is based on the noun *ichnos*, which means "footprint." It suggests that although we do not know where God is coming from or where he is going, we nevertheless do see his footprints, and it is these that puzzle us.

Let me direct you to the sandy beach of history to show you some of the untraceable footprints of God.

1. *Abraham.* I start with the story of Abraham, because that is where the story of God's preparation of a special people through whom the Messiah should come begins. God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan, promising him that he would become the father of a great nation: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; / I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). But Abraham did not become the father of a great nation in his lifetime. In fact, for years he and his wife had no children at all, and it was a source of continual embarrassment to them, particularly in view of God's promise.

Abraham's original name was Abram and it means "father of many." But Abram went through most of his life with no children. It was only when he was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety years old, that is, when both were past the age at which they might expect to have children, that God intervened and caused Isaac, the son of the promise, to be born.

What was God thinking of? Why the long delay? Why didn't the birth take place sooner and naturally? There is no easy answer. All we can say is that the paths of God are beyond our tracing out.

2. *Moses.* The great emancipator and lawgiver of Israel is my next example. Moses must have understood that God's hand was upon him and that it was time for the deliverance of the people from Egypt, which God had promised many years before (cf. Gen. 15:12-16). But when he started what he thought would be a successful rebellion by killing an Egyptian, the plan backfired and he had to flee Egypt. Moses was forty years old when he left Egypt, and for the next forty years this talented and highly educated man lived on the backside of the desert, working as a shepherd. He must have believed that his life was an utter failure.

At the end of this time, when he was eighty years old, God sent him to Egypt with the command to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." When they were set free, Moses led the people in the wilderness for an additional

forty years. Forty years! And what of the earlier eighty years? How wasted they seemed to be! In this case, too, God's decrees were unsearchable, and his paths beyond tracing out!

3. *Israel.* What about God's dealings with Israel, especially during those wilderness years? J. I.

Packer writes, "God guided Israel by means of a fiery cloudy pillar that went before them (Exod. 13:21f.); yet the way which he led them involved the nerve-shredding cliff-hanger of the Red Sea crossing, long days without water and meat in 'that great and terrible wilderness' (Deut. 1:19, cf. 31-33), and bloody battles with Amalek, Sihon and Og (Exod. 17:8-13; Numb. 21:21ff.), and we can understand, if not excuse, Israel's constant grumbling (cf. Exod. 14:10ff, 16:3, Numb. 11:4ff., 14:3ff., 20:3ff., 21:4ff.)."

Wasn't there an easier way to do it? What was the point of the many battles, delays, and deprivations? If there was a purpose to this history, surely it is unsearchable to our limited understanding.

4. *David.* I think, too, of David, Israel's great king. God had rejected Saul, David's predecessor, and had sent the prophet Samuel to anoint David to be the next king. But years went by in which David first served Saul and then was chased all over the country by him, since Saul saw David as a rival and wanted to put him to death. David did not become king until after Saul's death, when he was thirty-three years old. And even then he did not become king over the entire country. He was king only in Hebron, that is, over the southern territories, where he reigned seven years. He did not become king of the entire land until he was forty.

Whatever could God have had in mind by allowing Saul to reign so long, particularly when a man of David's exceptional character and leadership ability was waiting patiently in the wings? Surely God's ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts. His paths are beyond tracing out.

5. *Paul.* Paul is my next example. We have no difficulty with the story of Paul's remarkable conversion. It is a clear example of God's direct and effective intervention in history. It is what we expect God to be doing always. But think of Paul's career after that. First, three years in the wilderness with no apparent accomplishments during that time, as far as we know (Gal. 1:17-18). Then there were years in Tarsus, his hometown. It is not until mid-life that he is called to active missionary work, and even then it is mostly in the hinterlands of Asia Minor. Paul wanted to get to Rome, which he did eventually. But he arrived in Rome as a prisoner, spent most of his time there in chains and eventually died there by Nero's order.

Here is how Paul described his missionary years:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

2 Corinthians 11:24-

"Troubles, hardships and distresses... beatings, imprisonments and riots... hard work, sleepless nights and hunger" (2 Cor. 6:4-5). Why should that be? Why should the work be so hard? Couldn't God have worked out some of those problems so that Paul would not have had to be beaten, not have had to go hungry, and would have escaped the three shipwrecks and the other dangers? Couldn't God have lessened the

burden of Paul's concern for the churches entrusted to him? Or didn't God care?

No, we must not say that. We know that God cares. Yet why should God be planting his steps in history in that precise way? Surely his judgments are unsearchable to us and his paths beyond tracing out.

6. *Jesus.* My last example is Jesus. No individual in all history more evidently had the hand of God upon him. God said of him, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). But what a life! J. I. Packer writes:

No human life has ever been so completely guided by God, and no human life has ever qualified so comprehensively for the description "a man of sorrows." Divine guidance set Jesus at a distance from his family and fellow-townsmen, brought him into conflict with all the nation's leaders, religious and civil, and led finally to betrayal, arrest, and the cross....

By every human standard of reckoning, the cross was a *waste*—the waste of a young life, a prophet's influence, a leader's potential. We know the secret of its meaning and achievement only from God's own statements.

Ah, but we *do* know its meaning and achievement from God's statements. That is, we know that the most miserable of lives was actually the greatest of God's achievements. It was the means by which God accomplished the salvation of our lost race. That "waste," that loss, that suffering, was actually the focal point of history and the highest of achievements. And because we know that, we know that each of the other stories, including our own, is also part of a plan that— though beyond our complete tracing out—is nevertheless a sure and perfect plan, which will have a grand and blessed consummation.

A Crown Beyond the Cross

I am sure you see what I am getting at by this rehearsal of the biblical history. At least I am sure you saw it by the time I reviewed the life of

Jesus. Each of these stories involves the incomprehensible. From the perspective of our own wisdom, each is utterly inexplicable. Yet each was part of God's perfect plan. Though beyond our ability to trace out, each was also part of God's unfolding march through history.

Why was the birth of Abraham's son Isaac so long delayed? Abraham could hardly have known the answer, except perhaps dimly and by revelation. But we look back and by that revelation can see how Isaac was a type of Jesus Christ. And we can see how Abraham's steadfast faith in the God who was able to do miracles becomes a model for our faith and an encouragement when we are called to go through difficult times.

Why did Moses have to spend so many years in the wilderness? Why did Israel have such a difficult journey? Why was David's reign so long delayed? As we read these stories, we can see that in each case God was developing character in his people, and that he was showing himself to be more than adequate to their every human need.

As for Paul, he said, "[These things] happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9), and "we have this treasure [the gospel] in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). He added, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

"Therefore we do not lose heart."

Perhaps you are one who has been losing heart. You began the Christian life with confidence some years ago, but the details of your life have not worked out as you expected. As far as you can tell, you have not become a great saint. You are no great model of what it is to be a prayer warrior, neither have you been terribly effective as an evangelist. Even

your personal relationships have not gone as smoothly or as triumphantly as you had hoped. And much of your work, even your Christian work, seems wasted. Don't lose heart! God knows what he is doing with your life. You cannot search out his eternal decrees or judgments or perceive the end of the path on which he has been leading you, but this does not mean that God is confused, the outcome doubtful, or the final achievement vague. Fix your eyes on what is not seen—on God. Trust him and go on.

"Outwardly we are wasting away."

That is literally true for some. Perhaps cancer or some other debilitating disease has invaded your body, and you suspect that you do not have a very long time to live. "What a waste," you are saying. "Why can't I be strong and healthy and live a long, long life?" I do not know the answer to that. What God does with us in detail is not revealed in Scripture. It is one of the secret things that belong to God only. But that does not mean the painful path he calls you to walk has no purpose. It is how you conduct yourself in such "wasting times" that is the stuff of victory.

Set an example for us by lifting your eyes from what is material and tangible and passing away, and point us to him who is invisible and who does everything well. Show us how light and momentary these earthly troubles are. We need to know that. Show us how they are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

There is a hymn by the English writer W. H. Burleigh that we do not sing much because it is not in most of our hymnbooks. It is one of my favorite hymns. I learned it from that remarkable original hymnbook prepared by InterVarsity. It goes like this.

Still will we trust, though earth seem dark and dreary,
And the heart faints beneath his chast'ning rod;
Though rough and steep our pathway,
worn and weary, Still will we trust in
God.
Our eyes see dimly 'til by faith anointed,

And our blind choosing brings us grief and pain;
Through him alone, who hath our
way appointed, We find our
peace again.
Choose for us, God, nor let our weak preferring
Cheat us of good thou hast for us designed;
Choose for us, God; thy
wisdom is unerring, And we
are fools and blind.
Let us press on, in patient self-denial,
Accept the hardship, shrink not from the loss;
Our portion lies beyond the
hour of trial, Our crown
beyond the cross.

That is it exactly, isn't it? We have a crown laid up for us in heaven, just as Paul had a crown of righteousness "in store" for him (2 Tim. 4:8). But it is not on this side of suffering. It is beyond it. It is beyond the sickness, beyond the disappointments, beyond the pain. It is beyond the cross.

Chapter 176.
The Inscrutable God

Romans 11:34

William Beebe (1877-1962) was a biologist, explorer, and author, and he was also a personal friend of Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), the twenty-sixth president of the United States. He used to visit Roosevelt at Sagamore Hill, his home near Oyster Bay, Long Island, and he tells of a little game they used to play together. After an evening of talk, they would go outside onto the lawn surrounding the great house and search the sky until they found the faint spot of light beyond the lower left corner of the great square of Pegasus. One of them would recite: "That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as the Milky Way. It is

one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun."

Then Roosevelt would grin at Beebe and say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."

Our Smallness before God

I think of that story as we come to the last thoughts of Romans 11, following the apostle Paul's exclamation of wonder at the unsearchable depths of the riches of the wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and paths of God in verse 33. He is still thinking of God and marveling at God. But Paul's glance shifts, as it were, to the man who is doing the thinking and marveling, and he makes a contrast between God's unsearchable grandeur, on the one hand, and the poverty of man's small knowledge, on the other. In verse 34 he queries, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" In verse 35 he adds, "Who has ever given to God, that

God should repay him?"

Each of these verses is a quotation from the Old Testament, which reminds us that this is Paul's characteristic way of wrapping up an argument. We have already seen several examples of this in the letter, Romans 3:10-18, for example. Those verses contain Old Testament quotations that summarize Paul's arguments for the depravity of the race developed in chapters 1-3. We have the same thing in chapters 4, 9, 10, and earlier in chapter 11. To give a contrary example, the apostle Peter argued by *beginning* with the text, then providing what we would call an exposition (cf. Acts 2).

The quotation we are looking at in this study is from Isaiah 40:13, but it may have elements of several other passages (cf. Job 15:8; Jer. 23:18).

"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" Although drawn mostly from Isaiah, this was essentially the question put to Job when God interrogated him toward the end of that great Old Testament story. The bottom line is that no human being, however wise, has anything to offer to God in the matters of his

knowledge and wisdom. The question fits Paul's context beautifully, for it links up with his earlier reference to "wisdom" and "knowledge" in verse 33, though in reverse order. As F. Godet observed, "The first question contrasts the always limited knowledge of man with the infinite *knowledge* of God.... The second goes further, it bears on the relation between human and divine *wisdom.* It is no longer merely the *discovery* of the secrets of God by the study of his works which is in question, but some *good counsel* which man might have been called to give to the Creator in the organizing of his plans."

As I say, Paul is still thinking about God in this verse. But here he also turns our attention from God's attributes—the perfection of his wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and ways—to our limitations as measured by them. He tells us once again that we are not like God.

Isn't it interesting that Paul should have to do this, especially now, at this point in our studies of Romans 11? You may recall the distinction I made earlier between God's incommunicable attributes, those he does not share with us because he cannot, and God's communicable attributes, which he does share with us. The latter category contains such attributes as we have been studying here: knowledge, wisdom, the ability to make plans and decisions, and the capacity to act. We understand what we are talking about when we say that God has these attributes or possesses these abilities, because we have them ourselves. We, too, know things, possess a measure of wisdom, make decisions or plans, and act on them.

But even in this area we do not measure up to God. In fact, our knowledge, wisdom, planning, and acting are so far from his knowledge, wisdom, planning, and acting that it is even less than the equivalent of comparing ourselves to the billions of suns in the great galaxy of Andromeda or to the many other galaxies. To put it another way, the only things we know, we know because God has known them first and has revealed them to us. Because we are so small, the knowledge we have is itself also pitifully small. Or to put it still another way, we have nothing to contribute to God in any area.

How Little We Know

The way we need to explore this is to look at that part of the biblical writings known as "wisdom literature," particularly Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. I begin with Job, because that book deals directly with the extreme limitations of our knowledge.

We know Job's story. It is one of the great stories of all time. Job was a fortunate individual in many ways. He was wealthy; he had a wonderful family; he enjoyed good health. Moreover, he was a godly man. Even God called attention to Job's character: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job. 1:8). But within a very short time everything Job had was taken away from him, except his character. His goods were plundered or destroyed; his ten children were killed; and he was afflicted with painful sores that covered him from the soles of his feet to his scalp. He was reduced to abject and utter misery. He sat in ashes, suffering both within (in his soul) and without (in his body).

At this point Job's three close friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, came to him to sympathize and offer counsel. The bulk of the book consists of their attempts to explain what had happened, followed by Job's responses to their words.

To put it in our terms, what they were trying to explain is "why bad things happen to good people." And by our standards they did pretty well at it. They rightly assumed that this is a moral universe of cause-and-effect events and that God, who has created the universe and who guides its destiny, is a moral God. Everything has a purpose, they argued, and because this purpose is God's purpose, it must be good. Evil does not triumph. Virtue is rewarded. All this is entirely right, of course. In fact, if you were reading carefully, you will have recognized that these are the exact points I was making when I was speaking about the wisdom, decrees, and paths of God in the preceding studies.

What, then, was wrong with the counsel of Job's friends? And why was God so unhappy with them?—as he reveals himself to be later ("Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" [Job 38:2]).

The problem was not with their starting point or principles, for they were the very things that are revealed about the nature of reality in Scripture. Instead the problem was that these men, wise as they were, lacked sufficient knowledge to discern what God was doing. As the story points out at the beginning, God was waging war against the slanders and lies of Satan. Satan claimed that Job served God only because of what he got out of it, a standard utilitarian argument. God maintained that Job loved God because of who God was, regardless of what it might bring to him personally. Satan said, "Does Job fear God for nothing?... Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job. 1:9-11).

God allowed Satan to strike at Job's possessions and family, but though Job was personally crushed by these disasters, Job worshiped God, saying,

> *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.*
> *The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*
>
> *Job 1:21*

Next Satan wanted to strike at Job's health. "Stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face," Satan said to God (Job 2:5). But when God allowed Satan to be the instrument of devastating physical affliction for Job, Job said to his wife, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"—and the text points out that "in all this Job did not sin in what he said" (v. 10).

Job's friends knew none of this, of course. They had not the faintest idea of what was going on at the cosmic level. Therefore, although they had begun at the right starting place and had the right principles, what they actually had to say to Job turned out to be mere nonsense, which is why God rebuked them.

Moreover, notice the nature of God's rebuke. Their problem was that they were not aware of the invisible, cosmic nature of this struggle. But when God rebuked them (and Job, too) for their ignorance, he rebuked them not because they did not know the invisible dimensions of the struggle—what was going on between himself and Satan—but because they did not understand or know even the things they could see. God chided them for being unable to explain the origins of the earth ("Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" [Job. 38:4]). Scientists are not much closer to explaining that today. He chided them for being unable to explain or control the sea ("Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb?" [v. 8]). Today, with all our scientific advances we cannot even predict the movement of the sea's storms accurately, let alone control either it or them. Chapter after chapter, God chides Job and his friends for their profound and extensive ignorance of all natural forces—light and darkness; rain, snow, wind; the intricacies of the heavens; animal instincts and behavior; the migration patterns of birds and fish; and countless other observable phenomena.

But here is the point: If these people could not explain what they could see, how could they hope to understand and explain what they could not see? Obviously, not at all. They could not contribute to God's perfect knowledge in any respect. The only thing they could possibly do is what Job does at the end of the story—he shuts his mouth and admits his utter ignorance:

Then Job replied to the Lord:

> *"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.*

You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.
You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.'
My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.'"

Job 42:1-6

I have previously described the effect of our thinking about God and his "eternal decree" as (1) humility at our incomprehension and (2) awe before God and praise of him. We find both responses in Job's final words, as well as in the closing section of Romans 11.

Fools, and Blind

The second half of verse 34 goes an important step beyond what I have been describing up to this point. I have been writing about our extreme lack of knowledge, which is what "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" refers to. But the next words are also significant, for they add, "Or who has been his counselor?" This part deals with wisdom and how little of it we possess.

I turn here to the Book of Ecclesiastes. This is a short book; it has only twelve chapters. Yet Ecclesiastes is a high point of the wisdom literature in the sense that it shows the limits of man's earthbound wisdom, just as Job shows the limits of man's knowledge. Ecclesiastes is essentially a sermon on one text: "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. / 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (Eccles. 1:2). As anyone can tell just by looking at the subheads in the New International Version, the preacher develops the text to make these points: (1) wisdom is meaningless; (2) pleasures are meaningless; (3) wisdom and folly are meaningless; (4) toil is meaningless; (5) advancement is meaningless; and (6) riches are meaningless.

But surely we don't believe that, do we?

Haven't we been saying that God is sovereign over the affairs of his creation, that he has a single supreme purpose in all he does, and that this purpose is a good purpose because he is a good God? Of course, we have. Then how are we to understand Ecclesiastes? Is this merely the last words of an embittered cynic, which we can completely discount? Some Christian leaders have taught that. One of them once told me, "You can never preach a sermon from Ecclesiastes."

We know that is not correct, because "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful..." (2 Tim. 3:16). But how, then, is Ecclesiastes to be taken?

The answer is that this book shows us the limits and hence the folly of human wisdom apart from revelation. Here is the way J. I. Packer, who has done several helpful studies of Ecclesiastes, puts it:

Look (says the preacher) at the sort of world we live in. Take off your rose-colored spectacles, rub your eyes, and look at it long and hard. What do you see? You see life's background set by aimlessly recurring cycles in nature (1:4ff.). You see its shape fixed by times and circumstances over which we have no control (3:1ff.; 9:11f.). You see death coming to everyone sooner or later, but coming haphazard; its coming bears no relation to good or ill desert (7:15; 8:8). Men die like beasts (3:19f.), good men like bad, wise men like fools (2:14, 17; 9:2f.). You see evil running rampant (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 8:11; 9:3); rotters get on, good men don't (8:14). Seeing all this, you realize that God's ordering of events is inscrutable; much as you want to make it out, you cannot do so (3:11; 7:13f.; 8:17 RV; 11:5). The harder you try to understand the divine purpose in the ordinary providential course of events, the more obsessed and oppressed you grow with the apparent aimlessness of everything, and the more you are tempted to conclude that life really is as pointless as it looks.

But once you conclude that there really is no rhyme or reason in things, what "profit"—value, gain, point, purpose—can you find henceforth in any sort of constructive endeavor (1:3; 2:11, 22; 3:9; 5:16)? If life is senseless, then it is valueless; and in that case, what use is it working to create things, to build a business, to make money, even to seek wisdom

—for none of this can do you any obvious good (2:15f., 22f.; 5:11); it will only make you an object of envy (4:4); you can't take any of it with you (2:18ff.; 4:8; 5:15f.); and what you leave behind will probably be mismanaged after you have gone (2:19). What point is there, then, in sweating and toiling at anything? Must not all man's work be judged "vanity (emptiness, frustration) and a striving after wind" (1:14 RV)?

That is true, isn't it? Apart from what God is doing in Jesus Christ and in our lives, the last part of which is at best only partially revealed to us, everything is indeed "meaningless." There is more, of course. There is what God is doing, what he reveals. But before we can see those things, we need to see that there is no meaning in anything apart from them. One of the great proofs of our lack of wisdom is that we do not see even this fundamental point of earthly wisdom clearly.

Even Christians don't. Otherwise, why would they spend so much of their time and energy working for things that do not satisfy at any significant level and, in fact, will never do so?

Why do they spend their time acquiring houses and cars and television sets and fine furniture, which will eventually depreciate and decay?

Why do they work for increasingly larger paychecks and bank accounts, which they will not be able to take with them to heaven when they die?

Why do they yearn for earthly recognition, which can vanish in a flash?

Why do we do these things? We do them because we have not learned even the rudimentary earthly wisdom of the Book of Ecclesiastes, let alone the infinitely more profound wisdom of the revealed counsels of God. Yet we presume to suppose that we can criticize God for what he is doing in our lives. We think that we could tell him how to do things better, if we only had the chance. What folly! What utter folly! We who think we are teachers need to learn again the first principles of the oracles of God.

Paul asks the Corinthians, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made

foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:20). We need to learn that again. We need to hear again Paul's implied rebuke as he wisely asks the Romans "'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?'"

The answer clearly is "no one." Not you, not me. No one. Not one of us can contribute to the knowledge or wisdom of God in any respect.

Humility and Wisdom

So where does this leave us? Obviously, it is not intended to leave us in our folly. We are not called upon to be either ignorant or foolish. On the contrary, we are to trust God, work to develop our minds, and grow in true spiritual wisdom and understanding. How? Let me suggest these points.

1. *Learn that there is no true wisdom except in God.* That is why Proverbs 9:10 says rightly, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, / and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." We can know because God is a God who knows, and we can acquire wisdom because God is a God of wisdom. But we will achieve neither unless we begin with him.

2. *Learn that even though you begin with God, you will never fully understand God and therefore you will never fully understand his ways.* God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, / neither are your ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8). Moreover, since God's thoughts direct God's actions, clearly it will be his ways rather than yours that will be accomplished, for "Many are the plans in a man's heart, / but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails" (Prov. 19:21).

3. *Finally, learn to trust God and follow hard after him.* This leads me to the wisest saying of all: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; / in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Prov. 3:5-6). If you do not do that, your pitifully small knowledge and faulty wisdom will lead you eventually either to arrogance or

despair. But if you acknowledge your ignorance and foolishness and learn to trust God, you will find that God will provide all the knowledge you need—you will find it in Scripture—and if you ask him, he will give abundant wisdom, too (James 1:5).

Chapter 177.
The Ail-Sufficient God

Romans 11:35

One thing most people think about preachers is that they love to take offerings, and I suppose they do, especially if the offerings are for some great cause and the response is generous. I have been part of a few such offerings. My most common examples are the "Easter Sacrificial Offerings" of Tenth Presbyterian Church, which we receive each year for some area of special social need throughout the world. The giving is always generous.

But there was never an offering like the one I am going to discuss now. Israel's great King David was coming to the end of his reign, and his young son Solomon was being left behind to rule the kingdom and build a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. The temple had been David's great dream, what he hoped to leave behind as the capstone of his reign. But God had told David that the task would not be his because he was a man of war and that the temple would be built by Solomon instead. So David contented himself with making preparations for the temple's construction, collecting all the gold, silver, bronze, iron, and precious stones that would be needed.

To do that he took an offering. For his personal share he gave 3,000 talents of gold and 7,000 talents of silver. That converts to 110 metric tons of gold and 260 metric tons of silver. Then the leading families of the nation gave gifts, too. They gave 5,000 talents of gold, 10,000 talents of silver, 18,000 talents of bronze, and 100,000 talents of iron, plus many of the precious stones in their possession. It is difficult to convert these amounts into dollars, and scholars differ on what today's

equivalents would be, but the amounts add up to hundreds of millions of dollars at least. So it really was an enormous offering, perhaps the greatest single offering that has ever been taken for a religious work by anyone in any period of history.

For many, the success of a campaign like this would be a cause for self-congratulation. But not for David! Instead of congratulating either himself or the people, David praised God, acknowledging that it was because of him that the people had been able to give as they had given. His prayer of dedication said,

> *Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.*
> *Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.*
> *Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.*
> *Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things.*
> *In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.*
> *Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.*
>
> *1 Chronicles 29:1013*

David continued wisely, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (v. 14).

This was a very important acknowledgement, meaning, to put it in slightly different language, "The people have given generously, but we have been able to do so only by your grace and by returning to you what you have first seen fit to give us."

Three Rhetorical Questions

I begin our study of Romans 11:35 by referring to this, because the manner in which David responded to the generous offerings of the people for building the Jerusalem temple brilliantly illustrates our text. In this section of Romans 11, Paul has been praising God for his infinite superiority to his creatures in all areas, and he has made these contrasts graphic by three rhetorical questions, each of which implies a negative answer.

Question number one: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" (v. 34a).

Answer: No one! None of us even begins to come close to knowing what God knows. His knowledge is infinitely beyond ours.

Question number two: "Who has been his counselor?" (v. 34b).

Again, the answer is: No one! No one can possibly advise God so that he can do the job of governing the world better or more efficiently.

This brings us to question number three, the text for this study: "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" (v. 35).

Again, the answer is: No one! We may give to God, as the people did when David appealed to them for offerings for the temple. But what we give is only what God has first given to us, as David knew and stated. One of our hymns also states this correctly.

> We give thee but thine own,
> Whate'er the gift may be;
> All that we have is
> thine alone, A trust,
> O Lord, from thee.

Together these questions remind us of the self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and independence of God—the attributes of God that Paul has been teaching us to appreciate—and they show us that we have nothing to contribute. We have nothing to add either to who God is or to what he does.

And there is this additional point to the third question: We cannot place God under obligation to ourselves by giving to him. That is so important that I want to repeat it: *We cannot place God under obligation to ourselves by giving to him.*

Our Contribution Equals Nothing

That we have nothing to give to God is something Paul has already taught many times in the earlier parts of this letter. So we should understand it very well by now. Let me review his teaching briefly.

1. *We are justified by grace apart from human works.* This is the point of the first four chapters of the letter, in which Paul explains the depth of human depravity and impotence and shows how God has reached out to save us in Jesus Christ completely apart from anything in us. In our sin we imagine that God can be won over by some good work in us, grading us on the curve and saving us on the basis of some passing moral mark, as it were. Indeed, even after they have become Christians, there are people who suppose that they were saved because, although no one can be saved by works, they were nevertheless singled out by God because of something that was found in them—some aptitude for God, perhaps, or just faith.

Romans teaches that we are saved by none of these things, not even by faith. True, we are saved *through* faith. No one is saved without it. But even faith is God's gift, so that there will be no boasting on the day when the redeemed of the Lord stand before him. We do not contribute to our justification in any way.

2. *We are sanctified by the Holy Spirit apart from works.* This is the point of the second main section of Romans, chapters 5 through 8. It means that just as we have nothing to contribute to our justification, so also do we have nothing to contribute to our sanctification. It is true that there are things we are to do because we have been saved and that we will do them if we truly are. But that does not mean that we give anything to God in this area. What

we do is a response to what he has already done. It is because God has taken us out of Adam and placed us in Christ, giving us a new nature that possesses new desires, that we therefore follow after Jesus and grow in the grace God freely supplies.

In fact, when Paul gets to the end of this section, in Romans 8, and reflects on the certainty of our persevering in faith, he is thinking not of anything in us, but of God and what he has done for us. This is why we read, "And we know that in all things *God works* for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:28-30, emphasis added).

The next verses tell us that God is for us (v. 31), that he gave his Son for us (v. 32), that he will give us all things (v. 32), that he has justified us (v. 33), that Jesus is interceding for us (v. 34), and that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (vv. 35-39). It is all of God from the beginning to the end.

3. *We are chosen apart from works.* The third section of Romans, chapters 9 through 11, teaches that what God is doing in history does not depend on us either, not even in the sense that God is primarily obliged to make us happy. On the contrary, Paul teaches that history unfolds to reveal God's attributes—his love and grace, of course, but also such things as his power, justice, and wrath—and to manifest his glory.

What a transformation that would mean for most of today's Christians, if they could only see it. I have a good friend named Mike Horton, who has written about this well in a book entitled *Made in America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism.* He says:

The older theology tended to produce character.... By the end of the twentieth century, we have become God's demanding little brats. In church, we must be entertained. Our emotions must be charged.... We

must be offered amusing programs—we gave up a lot to become Christians and what little teaching we do get must cater to our pragmatic, self-centered interests. The preaching must be filled with clever anecdotes and colorful illustrations, with nothing more than passing references to doctrine: "I want to know what this means for me and my daily experience!"

We have forgotten that God is a monarch. He is the King by whom and for whom all things were made, and by whose sovereign power they are sustained. We exist for his pleasure, not he for ours; we are on this earth to entertain him, please him, to adore him, to bring him satisfaction, excitement and joy. Any gospel which seeks to answer the question, "What's in it for me?" has it all backwards. The question is, "What's in it for God?"

Of course, that brings us back to our text, where Paul asks, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" None of us has. Therefore, God is in debt to no one to do what he or she desires.

We Cannot Put God in Debt

Yet we continue to think like this, often even after we have become Christians, even after we have received the kind of teaching we have studied so carefully in Romans. Think with me how we suppose we put God in our debt.

1. *We do so when we think we have caught God in some fault.* Most would not put it this way. But every time we are critical of God or complain to God about something, we are telling him indirectly, and sometimes quite directly, that we believe he has made a mistake and should correct it.

"I think he made me too short. I should be taller."

"Life would be better for me if I were only better-looking."

"God has me stuck in a dead-end job, when I could be accomplishing something important. He should have given me opportunities I did not have or promotions that were given to someone else."

"He made a mistake not giving me a husband."

Or "... giving me the one I have."

Whenever we find ourselves thinking along these lines, what we are doing is supplying God with what we suppose is the knowledge or wisdom he lacks and saying that he should acknowledge his mistake and thank us for straightening him out. Moreover, we believe that he is now indebted to us for supplying that particular bit of wisdom and should reciprocate accordingly. Isn't it true that you have often thought like that? Isn't it foolish?

Remember our text the next time you find yourself slipping into such a moronic thought pattern. "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" Job experienced terrible tragedies, but he said, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand" (Job 42:3).

2. *We do so when we think we have caught God in an injustice.* This mistake is closely related to what I just said, but it is a step further along the sad path of human pride and rebellion. The key to this erroneous line of thought is finding ourselves saying that what God is doing is not *right.*

"It's not right that I should be sick when my friends are all well."

"It's not right that she should have gotten the prize rather than myself. I worked harder for it."

"It is not right for God to let me go on like this without answering my prayers as I would like or doing what I have repeatedly asked him to do." I am sure you get the idea.

When we find ourselves thinking like this, we must remember how Abraham pleaded to God for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He knew that his nephew Lot had gone to live in those cities and that, if God destroyed them, his nephew and his family would also be destroyed. So Abraham pleaded, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the

fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:23-25).

It was basically a good argument, for the Judge of all the earth must do right. The trouble with it is that there were none righteous. So although God did spare Lot and his wife from destruction, the destruction nevertheless did come. The cities were blotted out and their inhabitants were killed. You cannot put God in your debt by crying, "Justice!" Justice condemns! Justice sends people to hell! It is not justice we need from God. It is grace, and grace is the very opposite of debt.

If you think God owes you justice, remember our text: "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" The only thing we have ever earned from God is condemnation.

3. *We do so when we think we have obligated God by some service.* This is a third way Christians sometimes think they have placed God in their debt. They suppose that they have earned credits with him by some acts of self-sacrifice or service. One of my favorite stories along this line was told by R. A. Torrey. He was in Melbourne, Australia, and one afternoon at a meeting for businessmen a note was handed to him. It said, Dear Dr. Torrey:

I am in great perplexity. I have been praying for a long time for something that I am confident is according to God's will, but I do not get it. I have been a member of the Presbyterian Church for thirty years, and have tried to be a consistent one all that time. I have been Superintendent in the Sunday School for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years; and yet God does not answer my prayer and I cannot understand it. Can you explain it to me?

Torrey read the note from the platform and replied, "It is very easy to explain it. This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for thirty years, a faithful Sunday School Superintendent for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years, that God is under obligation to answer his prayer. He is really praying in his own

name, and God will not hear our prayers when we approach him in that way."

After Torrey had finished speaking, a man came up to him and admitted that he had written the note. He said, "You have hit the nail square on the head. I see my mistake."

Many people make that mistake. But even in the area of Christian service we need to see that God cannot be put in our debt by anything you or I do. "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" The answer is: No one, not even the most dedicated, most self-sacrificing, most consistent, most devout, most exemplary Christian. Nothing flows to us from God because of debt. A great deal comes to us, but it is all of grace, and grace is a different category entirely.

Living by Grace

So let's talk about grace again. As soon as we abandon any thought of bringing God down to our level so he becomes answerable to our ideas of what is wise or just, and when we give up thoughts of earning anything from him by our service, we are ready to live the Christian life as he has planned it for us and can discover what living by grace is.

It starts with humility, as we have seen several times already in these studies: humility before God, who is infinitely great, but also humility in terms of our own weak service. We remember that Jesus said, "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10).

We will never get anywhere unless we remember the primary relationships of Creator to creature and Master to servant.

But that is not all that can be said, of course, for we also remember that Jesus told his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends..." (John 15:15). "You are my friends if you do what I command" (v. 14). God owes us nothing. All is of grace. But God, for the sake of his own good pleasure, has rescued us from our sin and has raised us from the status of mere servants to being sons and daughters of God, co-workers with Jesus Christ and heirs of all God is and has. That leads to thanksgiving and also to love for the one who has been so gracious to us.

And one more thing: It leads to service. For although we cannot put God in our debt by our contributions to his knowledge or wisdom or ideas about how things should run or even by our Christian service, as soon as we realize this and understand that we cannot earn God's favor but receive it by grace alone, that truth propels us to service. For what we most want to do when we understand that is to live for God's glory, which is what the start of the next chapter in Romans is about. It is where we will pick up in the next volume of this series: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:1-2).

Let me say it again: God is not obliged to give you anything. Yet he gives you everything, if you will receive it in Christ. The great wonder is that the people who know this, who know they cannot give God anything that he has not first given them, nevertheless give him everything.

Chapter 178.
A Christian World-View

Romans 11:36

One thing we have a lot of today is buzz words. "Buzz word" is itself a buzz word. But there are also buzz words in psychology (Freudian slip, guilt complex); politics (Reaganomics, sound bytes, a thousand points of light); education (political correctness); computer technology (input, down time); and business (bottom line, bullish or bearish, and market driven). One of my favorites is "paradigm shift." A *paradigm* is a complete model or pattern, originally referring to a list of all the inflectional forms of a verb or noun, showing its complete conjugation or declension. A *paradigm shift* is a total reordering of how one looks at or evaluates something.

If you love someone and then for some reason cease to love that person and begin to hate him or her instead, that is a paradigm shift. If you began as a communist, as the leaders of the Eastern Bloc countries all originally did, and then become a capitalist, that is a paradigm shift of great proportions.

What is the greatest of all paradigm shifts? The greatest paradigm shift is the one that takes place when a person becomes a Christian—or at least that is when it begins to take place. In our unsaved, unregenerate state, everything revolves around ourselves. We are the measure of all things. Everything in the universe is for us and for our glory. When we become Christians, we see that the world and all that is in it is actually from God, is governed by him, and exists for his glory. It is what the last verse of Romans 11 expresses when it says of God, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Let me do something unusual here. Let me give a second introduction to this study. It is in the form of a trivia question: What was the last song recorded by the Beatles before their breakup in the seventies? Answer: "I, Me, Mine." That "last song" is actually the first song as well as the last song of the unregenerate heart. But—in significant and radical contrast—the song of the redeemed is Romans 11:36.

Secular Humanism Is Not New

If we think that the universe revolves around ourselves or that we are the only valid measure of all that is, we are "secular humanists." That is a buzz word, too, of course. It is particularly popular with fundamentalists and television preachers, who speak of secular humanism as if it were the unique and particularly dangerous enemy of our time. But it is not new at all. In fact, it is the ancient, natural inclination of the unsaved mind and heart.

I have always thought that the very best statement of secular humanism is to be found in the Bible, in the Book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar was king in Babylon at this time. One day, when he was walking on the roof of his royal palace he looked out over the great capital city of his empire and took unto himself all the glory for its existence. He said—this is the classic statement I referred to—"Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30). Nebuchadnezzar was saying that the great city of Babylon and its empire, which he admired (and desired) more than anything else in the world, was *from* him (he "built" it), *through* him ("by my mighty power") and *for* him ("for the glory of my majesty").

God did not look at it that way, of course. So the next paragraph tells how Nebuchadnezzar was judged by God with insanity and was driven away to live with the wild animals, to look like and behave like them. He was insane for seven years, until he came to his senses both mentally and spiritually, which was God's way of saying that secular humanism is a crazy way of looking at the world.

Anyone who thinks he or she is the center of the universe is spiritually insane. A person who thinks like this is out of his or her mind.

The Regenerate Mind

The regenerate mind is a renewed mind, as Paul is going to make clear at the beginning of the next chapter: "Do not conform any longer to the

pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom.

12:2a). This mind thinks differently about things. But specifically how? What form does a renewed mind take? Or, to express it differently, what is a genuinely Christian world-view?

Here is an initial statement of what is involved, made by A. W. Tozer in a chapter in *The Pursuit of God* called "Restoring the Creator-Creature Relation." Tozer says,

The moment we make up our minds that we are going on with this determination to exalt God over all we step out of the world's parade. [I think that is a great expression: "out of the world's parade."] We shall find ourselves out of adjustment to the ways of the world, and increasingly so as we make progress in the holy way. We shall acquire a new viewpoint; a new and different psychology will be formed within us; a new power will begin to surprise us by its upsurgings and its outgoings.

Our break with the world will be the direct outcome of our changed relation to God. For the world of fallen men does not honor God. Millions call themselves by his name, it is true, and pay some token respect to him, but a simple test will show how little he is really honored among them. Let the average man be put to the proof on the question of who is *above*, and his true position will be exposed. Let me be forced into making a choice between God and money, between God and men, between God and personal ambition, God and self, God and human love, and God will take second place every time. Those other things will be exalted above. However the man may protest, the proof is in the choices he makes day after day throughout life.

"Be thou exalted" is the language of victorious spiritual experience. It is the little key to unlock the door to great treasures of grace.

A Christian World-View Text

Romans 11:36 is what I call a Christian world-view text. That is, it expresses in classic language this altered understanding of who God is and who we are and what we owe to God.

It is not the only verse in Paul's writings that is along these lines, of course. I think also of 1 Corinthians 8:6 ("Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live") or Ephesians 4:4-6 ("There is... one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all") or Colossians 1:16 ("For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him"). Yet Romans 11:36 stands out from these other verses as a particularly succinct statement of the Christian outlook: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

There are two areas in which we specifically need to think through what this means.

1. *God and creation.* We think of the creation first because of the words "all things"—"For from him and through him and to him are *all things."* "All things" means "all that is," the entire universe. Romans 11:36 teaches that everything in the universe is from God; it has come into existence and is then sustained through God's creative power, and it is for God's glory. John Murray unfolds the meaning of the verse like this: God "is the source of all things in that they have proceeded from him; he is the Creator. He is the agent through whom all things subsist and are directed to their proper end. And he is the last end to whose glory all things will redound."

There was a time when God was alone. In that time before all time, when even space did not exist, God, the great "I am," existed and was as perfect, glorious, and blessed in his eternal existence as he is now. Before there was a sun, the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—dwelt in light ineffable. Before there was an earth on which to rest it, the throne of God stood firm. If that great God, dwelling in perfect

solitude, chose to create anything at all, whether the universe of which we are a part or any other possible universe, it is clear that the conception of it and plans for it must have come from him, since there was no other from whom they could have come.

But it is not only the plan that has come from God. The actualization of the plan was *through* him as well. That is, he is also the Creator and then the Sustainer of the universe. When God set out to create the heavens and earth, he did not call for help, since there were none to help him. He did not even make use of existing matter, for matter itself did not exist. God created everything out of nothing. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). That means creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). It is one of the most profound statements ever written, for it is based on the inescapable assumption that if anything exists, then God, the uncaused First Cause, must exist and be the Creator of it all.

For what were the heavens and earth created? That is, what was the purpose of creation? We think of the universe as being made for us. But since God is a purposeful God and planned the universe for an altogether wise and noble purpose before any of us existed, even in his own mind, it is clear that he could not have taken as his purpose a creature that did not then exist. And that means that his motive must be entirely in himself. Creation must be for his glory.

The text is right when it tells us "to him are all things." And Albert Barnes is right in his *Notes on the New Testament when* he says, "The reason or end for which all things were formed... is to promote his honor and glory.... It is not to promote his *happiness,* for he was eternally happy; not to *add* anything to him, for he is infinite; but that he might act as God, and have the honor and praise that is due to God."

This should humble us since, if we understand it, we will understand that even the ability to dispute with God or, for that matter, to deny his existence comes from him. This is a point that got through to that brilliant English professor C. S. Lewis and led in part to his conversion. Lewis wrote, "In the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—

in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found that I was forced to assume that one part of reality— namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. "

We could pursue this at greater length, but it should be clear from what I have said how important Romans 11:36 is, when it teaches that the entire universe is from God, through God, and to God. If you have been thinking differently and come at last to think in this biblical way, it will be a paradigm shift of huge proportions.

2. *God and the gospel.* This is the second area in which we need to think through the meaning of Romans 11:36. Like the first, this is obvious, since it is the gospel of salvation by grace that Paul has been concerned about in this letter, and with this context we cannot miss that the way of salvation is also from God, through God, and for his glory.

It is *from* him, for he has planned it all. Who else could have planned it? No priest. No rabbi. No shaman. No guru. Only God could have planned a way of salvation that meets the austere requirements of his unyielding justice and yet also justifies sinners. Only God could have planned a salvation that is apart from human merit or good works—it is all of grace—and yet be able to transform those who are saved so they achieve a level of righteousness and produce good works that surpass the righteousness and good works of those who are trying to be saved by them.

Even the timing of salvation is of God. He ordained the precise moment in history when the Savior should be born in Bethlehem (Gal. 4:4). He planned the moments of his appearance to the people, his identification by John the Baptist, his years of teaching and healing, his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. And God ordained the precise time of the resurrection and of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

The accomplishment of our salvation was *through* him, that is, through what Jesus Christ has done. Salvation is not achieved through anything you or I have done or can do. We can do nothing. Jesus did it all. We rightly sing:

> There was no other good enough
> To pay the price of sin;
> He only could unlock the gate
> Of heaven and let us in.

Moreover, that plan of salvation is *to* his glory. To be sure, it also achieves an eternity of blessing for those who are redeemed. We benefit greatly and will praise God forever, thanking him for what he has done for us. But if you understand what Paul has been writing about in Romans 9-11, you will know that our happiness is not God's chief purpose in ordering the plan of salvation as he has. All you have to ask is: "Why are some chosen to be saved while others are passed over? Why are some brought to faith while others are rejected?" The answer is that salvation is for God's glory and that God is glorified in each case. In the case of the elect, the love, mercy, and grace of God are abundantly displayed. In the case of the lost, the patience, power, and wrath of God are equally lifted up.

Give God the Glory

The final thing I want to accomplish in this study is to make Romans 11:36 very personal for you. For it is obvious that if the entire creation is "from him and through him and to him" and if the way of salvation is likewise "from him and through him and to him," then you, as a part of that creation (especially if you are a part of that redeemed creation), are "from him and through him and to him" as well. You also exist for his glory and should give it to him.

Let me start with your natural endowments or talents. Where do they come from? That keen mind, those winsome aspects of personality, that attractive appearance and gracious disposition, that smile that you possess—they all come from God. They have been designed for you by his sovereign decree and imparted to you by his providential working.

But they are for *his* glory, not for yours. The Corinthians were a particularly vain people, boasting of their individual superiorities to other people. Paul called them arrogant. But he asked them, "Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

You are no different. Therefore, glorify God.

Let's move to salvation. We have seen that the plan of salvation was conceived by God, that it was accomplished through the life and death of Jesus Christ, that its ultimate goal is God's glory. If that is so, and it is, you should abandon the arrogant assumption that getting saved was your idea or that it was accomplished by you, even in part, or that it is meant to honor you. It is not for your honor, but for God's glory.

Do you think God saved you because of any righteousness you possess or might one day acquire by your efforts? The Bible says, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5).

Do you think it was because of some little germ of faith that God was able to find in you but not in some other less deserving person? The Bible says, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Have you had any longings after God? Do you want to pray? Do you find that you want to read God's Word and come to understand it better? Do you seek to worship God? Are you attracted to the company of other Christian people? If those things are true of you, let me ask: Where do you think those desires came from if not from God? They are not from you. You are sinful. In yourself you have no aspirations after God. Holy desires come from a holy God and are present in you through the working of his divine Spirit. They are for his glory.

Therefore, glorify God. Praise him for them.

What about temptation? We live in a world in which sin and evil bombard us and in which we are attacked even by the powers of evil themselves. What keeps you from falling? What is it that enables you to stand your ground against Satan's forces? It is God, God alone. The Bible says, "... God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

It is God who keeps you. Therefore, glorify God.

Finally, I ask you to think about your work, particularly your work for God as a Christian. Perhaps you say, "Surely that at least belongs to me, is achieved by me, and can be for my honor." Really? If in your unsaved state you had no righteousness of your own, understood nothing of spiritual things, and did not seek God (as Romans 3:10-11 tells us), how could you even have had a desire to work for God unless God himself put it there? Our work for God flows from our love of God. But "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). How can anything be achieved except through God? Even the ability to plan a secular project or the strength to dig a ditch comes from him, since all is from God. If that is true of even secular efforts, how much more true must it be of Christian work? Spiritual work must be accomplished through God's Spirit. So it is not you or I who stir up a revival, build a church, or convert even a single soul. Rather, it is as we work, being led in the work by God, that God himself by the power of his Holy Spirit converts and sanctifies those whom he chooses to call to faith.

Do not take the glory of God to yourself. It is fatal to do that in any work, but especially in Christian work. Instead, glorify God.

I end with these words from Charles Spurgeon:

"To whom be glory forever." This should be the single desire of the Christian.... He may desire to see his family well brought up, but only that "To God may be glory forever." He may wish for prosperity in his business, but only so far as it may help him to promote this—"To whom

be glory forever." He may desire to attain more gifts and more graces, but it should only be that "To him may be glory forever."

At my work behind the counter, or in the exchange, let me be looking out to see how I may glorify him. If I be walking in the fields, let my desire be that the trees may clap their hands in his praise.... Never be silent when there are opportunities, and you shall never be silent for want of opportunities. At night fall asleep still praising your God; as you close your eyes let your last thought be, "How sweet to rest upon the Savior's bosom!" In afflictions praise him; out of the fires let your song go up; on the sick-bed extol him; dying, let him have your sweetest notes. Let your shouts of victory in the combat with the last great enemy be all for him; and then when you have burst the bondage of mortality, and come into the freedom of immortal spirits, then, in a nobler, sweeter song, you shall sing unto his praise. Be this, then, your constant thought—"To him be glory forever."

What is the chief end of man? The answer comes from *The Westminster Shorter Catechism:* "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

Chapter 179.
Soli Deo Gloria

Romans 11:36

The title of this study is not an exact translation of the second half of Romans 11:36, but I have selected it because it is the way the Protestant Reformers expressed what this verse is about and because the words, though in Latin, are well known. *Soli Deo Gloria* means "To God alone be the glory." *Soli Deo*—"to God alone." *Gloria*—"the glory." These words stand virtually as a motto of the Reformation.

The Reformers loved the word *solus* ("alone").

They wrote about *sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone." Their concern in using this phrase was with authority, and what they meant to

say by it was that the Bible alone is our ultimate authority—not the pope, not the church, not the traditions of the church or church councils, still less personal intimations or subjective feelings, but Scripture only. These other sources of authority are sometimes useful and may at times have a place, but Scripture is ultimate. Therefore, if any of these other authorities differ from Scripture, they are to be judged by the Bible and rejected, rather than the other way around.

The Reformers also talked about *sola fide*, meaning "faith alone." At this point they were concerned with the purity of the gospel, wanting to say that the believer is justified by God through faith entirely apart from any works he or she may have done or might do. Justification by faith alone became the chief doctrine of the Reformation.

The Reformers also spoke of *sola gratia*, which means "grace alone." Here they wanted to insist on the truth that sinners have no claim upon God, that God owes them nothing but punishment for their sins, and that, if he saves them in spite of their sins, which he does in the case of the elect, it is only because it pleases him to do so. They taught that salvation is by grace only.

There is a sense in which each of these phrases is contained in the great Latin motto *Soli Deo Gloria*. In Romans 11:36, it follows the words "for from him and through him and to him are all things," and it is because this is so, because all things really are "from him and through him and to him," that we say, "To God alone be the glory." Do we think about the Scripture? If it is from God, it has come to us through God's agency and it will endure forever to God's glory.
Justification by faith? It is from God, through God, and to God's glory. Grace? Grace, too, has its source in God, comes to us through the work of the Son of God, and is to God's glory.

Many Christian organizations have taken these words as their motto or even as their name. I know of at least one publishing company today that is called *Soli Deo Gloria*. It is also an appropriate theme with which to end these studies of the third main (and last doctrinal) section of Paul's letter to the Romans. Indeed, what greater theme could there

be? For what is true of all things—that they are "from" God, "through" God, and "to" God—is true also of glory. Glory was God's in the beginning, is God's now, and shall be God's forever. So we sing in what is called the *Gloria Patri*.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be:
World without end. Amen.

Haldane's Revival

At the beginning of this series—in volume 1, chapter 2-177 studies ago, I mentioned a revival that took place in Geneva, Switzerland, under the leadership of a remarkable Scotsman named Robert Haldane (1764-1842). He was one of two brothers who were members of the Scottish aristocracy in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. His brother, James Haldane (1768-1851), was a captain with the British East India Company. Robert was the owner of
Gleneerie and other estates in Perthshire. When he was converted in the decade before 1800,
Robert sold a major part of his lands and applied the proceeds to advancing the cause of Jesus Christ in Europe. James became an evangelist and later an influential pastor in Edinburgh, where he served for fifty-two years.

In the year 1815, Robert Haldane visited Geneva. One day when he was in a park reading his
Bible, he got into a discussion with some young men who turned out to be theology students.
They had not the faintest understanding of the gospel, so Haldane invited them to come to his rooms twice a week for Bible study. They studied Romans, and the result of those studies was the great *Exposition of Romans* by Haldane from which I so often quote.

All those students were converted and in time became leaders in church circles throughout Europe. One was Merle d'Aubigné, who became

famous for his classic *History of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century.* We know the first part of it as *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*. Another of these men was Louis Gaussen, author of *Theopneustia*, a book on the inspiration of the Scriptures. Others were Frédéric Monod, the chief architect and founder of the Free Churches in France; Bonifas, who became an important theologian; and César Malan, another distinguished leader. These men were so influential that the work of which they became a part was known as Haldane's Revival.

What was it that got through to these young men, lifting them out of the deadly liberalism of their day and transforming them into the powerful force they became? The answer is: the theme and wording of the very verses we have been studying, Romans 11:33-36. In other words, a proper understanding of God's sovereignty.

We know this because of a letter from Haldane to Monsieur Cheneviere, a pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church and Professor of Divinity at the University of Geneva. Cheneviere was an Arminian, as were all the Geneva faculty, but Haldane wrote to him to explain how appreciation of the greatness of God alone produced the changes in these men. Here is his explanation:

There was nothing brought under the consideration of the students of divinity who attended me at Geneva which appeared to contribute so effectually to overthrow their false system of religion, founded on philosophy and vain deceit, as the sublime view of the majesty of God presented in the four concluding verses of this part of the epistle: Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things. Here God is described as his own last end in everything that he does. Judging of God as such an one as themselves, they were at first startled at the idea that he must love himself supremely, infinitely more than the whole universe, and consequently must prefer his own glory to everything besides. But when they were reminded that God in reality is infinitely more amiable and more valuable than the whole creation and that consequently, if he views things as they really are, he must regard himself as infinitely

worthy of being more valued and loved, they saw that this truth was incontrovertible.

Their attention was at the same time directed to numerous passages of Scripture, which assert that the manifestation of the glory of God is the great end of creation, that he has himself chiefly in view in all his works and dispensations, and that it is a purpose in which he requires that all his intelligent creatures should acquiesce, and seek and promote it as their first and paramount duty.

A testimony like that leads me to suggest that the reason we do not see great periods of revival today is that the glory of God in all things has been largely forgotten by the contemporary church. It follows that we are not likely to see revival again until the truths that exalt and glorify God in salvation are recovered. Surely we cannot expect God to move among us greatly again until we can again truthfully say, "To him [alone] be the glory forever! Amen."

To Him Be the Glory

Romans 11:36 is the first doxology in the letter. But it is followed by another at the end, which is like it, though more complete: "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Rom. 16:27). It is significant that both doxologies speak of the glory of God, and that forever. Here are two questions to help us understand them.

1. *Who is to be glorified?*

The answer is: the sovereign God. For the most part, we start with man and man's needs. But Paul always started with God, and he ended with him, too. In fact, the letter to the Romans is so clearly focused on God that it can be outlined accurately in these terms. Donald Grey Barnhouse published ten volumes on Romans, and he reflected Paul's focus in the titles for these ten volumes, all but the first of which has God in the title. Volume one was *Man's Ruin.* But then came *God's Wrath, God's Remedy, God's River, God's Grace, God's Freedom, God's*

Heirs, God's Covenants, God's Discipline, and *God's Glory.* We say with Paul, "To God be the glory forever! Amen."

2. *Why should God be glorified?*

The answer is that "from him and through him and to him are all things," particularly the work of salvation. *Why is man saved?* It is not because of anything in men and women themselves but because of God's grace. It is because God has elected us to it. God has predestinated his elect people to salvation from before the foundation of the world. *How is man saved? The* answer is by the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus, the very Son of God. We could not save ourselves, but God saved us through the vicarious, atoning death of Jesus Christ. *By what power are we brought to faith in Jesus?* The answer is by the power of the Holy Spirit through what theologians call effectual calling. God's call quickens us to new life. *How can we become holy?* Holiness is not something that originates in us, is achieved by us, or is sustained by us. It is due to God's joining us to Jesus so that we have become different persons than we were before he did it. We have died to sin and been made alive to righteousness. Now there is no direction for us to go in the Christian life but forward. *Where are we headed?* Answer: to heaven, because Jesus is preparing a place in heaven for us. *How can we be sure of arriving there?* It is because God, who began the work of our salvation, will continue it until we do. God never begins a work that he does not eventually bring to a happy and complete conclusion.

"To him be the glory forever! Amen."

The great Charles Hodge says of the verse we are studying;

Such is the appropriate conclusion of the doctrinal portion of this wonderful epistle, in which more fully and clearly than in any other portion of the Word of God, the plan of salvation is presented and defended. Here are the doctrines of grace, doctrines on which the pious in all ages and nations have rested their hopes of heaven, though they may have had comparatively obscure intimations of their nature. The leading principle of all is that God is the source of all good, that in

fallen man there is neither merit nor ability, that salvation, consequently, is all of grace, as well satisfaction as pardon, as well election as eternal glory. For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things; to whom be glory forever. Amen.

So let us give God the glory, remembering that God himself says:

> *I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*
>
> *Isaiah 42:8 and*
>
> *For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.*
> *How can I let myself be defamed?*
> *I will not yield my glory to another.*
>
> *Isaiah 48:11*

People Who Give God Glory

What of the objections? What of those who object to the many imagined bad results of such God-directed teaching? Won't people become immoral, since salvation, by this theory, is by grace rather than by works? Won't they lose the power of making choices and abandon all sense of responsibility before God and other people? Won't people cease to work for worthwhile goals and quit all useful activity? Isn't a philosophy that tries to glorify God in all things a catastrophe?

A number of years ago, Roger R. Nicole, professor of systematic theology at Gordon-Conwell Divinity School in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and now at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, answered such objections in a classic address for the Philadelphia
Conference on Reformed Theology (1976), basing his words on an earlier remarkable address by
Emile Doumergue, a pastor who for many years was dean of an evangelical seminary in southern France. Nicole's address was likewise titled "Soli Deo Gloria." The quotations below are from his answers to three important questions.

1. *Doesn't belief in the sovereignty of God encourage evil by setting people free from restraints? Doesn't it make morality impossible?*

"I suppose one could proceed to discuss this in a theological manner—to examine arguments, consider objections, and line up points in an orderly disposition. I would like, however, instead of going into a theological discussion, to challenge you in terms of an historical consideration. In the Reformation, there was a group of men who made precisely these assertions. Over against the prevailing current, they said that man is radically corrupt and is therefore totally unable by himself to please God. He is incapable of gathering any merits, let alone merit for others. But did these assertions damage morality? Were these people a group of scoundrels who satisfied their own sinful cravings under the pretense of giving glory to God? One does not need to be very versed in church history to know that this was not so. There were at that time thefts, murders, unjust wars. Even within the church there was a heinous and shameful trafficking of sacred positions.

"But what happened?

"These people, who believed that man is corrupt and that only God can help him, came forward like a breath of fresh air. They brought in a new recognition of the rights of God and of his claim upon the lives of men. They brought in new chastity, new honesty, new unselfishness, new humbleness, and a new concern for others. "Honest like the Huguenots," they used to say.... Immorality was not promoted; it was checked by the recognition of the sovereignty of God.

"That is impossible,' some say. Yet it happened."

2. *Doesn't belief in the sovereignty of God eliminate man's sense of responsibility and destroy human freedom? Doesn't it destroy potential?*

"Again, rather than going into the arguments of the matter, let us merely examine what happened in the sixteenth century when the sovereignty of God was asserted. Did the people involved allow themselves to be robbed of all initiative? Were they reduced to slavery under the power

of God? Not at all! On the contrary, they were keenly aware of their responsibility. They had the sense that for everything they were doing, saying and thinking they were accountable to God. They lived their lives in the presence of God, and in the process they were pioneers in establishing and safe-guarding precious liberties—liberty of speech, religion and expression—all of which are at the foundation of the liberties we cherish in the democratic world.

"Far from eclipsing their sense of freedom, the true proclamation of the sovereignty of God moved them toward the recognition and expression of all kinds of human freedoms which God has himself provided for those whom he has created and redeemed.

"'It is impossible that this should happen,' we are told. Perhaps! But it happened."

3. *Doesn't commitment to God's sovereignty undercut strenuous human activity? Doesn't it make people passive?*

"We may make an appeal to history. What did these people—Calvin, Farel, Knox, Luther—what did they do? Were they people who reclined on a soft couch, saying, 'If God is pleased to do something in Geneva, let him do it. I will not get in his way'? Or, 'If God wants to have some theses nailed to the door of the chapel of Wittenberg Castle, let him take the hammer. I will not interfere'? You know very well that this is not so. These were not people lax in activity. They were not lazy. Calvin may be accused of many things, but one thing he has seldom been accused of is laziness. No, when the sovereignty of God is recognized, meaningfulness comes to human activity. Then, instead of seeing our efforts as the puny movements of insignificant people unable to resist the enormous momentum of a universe so much larger than ourselves, we see our activity in the perspective of a sovereign plan in which even small and insignificant details may be very important. Far from undermining activity, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God has been a strong incentive for labor, devotion, evangelism and missions.

"'Impossible!' Yet it happened."

God's Blessings for Our World

Nicole continues: "In the first century the world was in a frightful condition. One does not need to be a great authority on Roman history to know that. There were signs of the breakdown of the Roman Empire —rampant hedonism and a dissolution of morals. But at that point God was pleased to send into the world that great preacher of the sovereignty of God, the apostle Paul, and this introduced a brand new principle into the total structure. The preaching of Paul did not avert the collapse of the Roman Empire, but it postponed it. Moreover, it permitted the creation of a body of believers that persisted through the terrible invasions of the barbarian hordes, and even through the Dark Ages....

"In the sixteenth century... the church had succumbed to deep corruption. It was corrupt 'in its head and members.' In many ways it was a cesspool of iniquity. People did not know how to remedy the situation. They tried councils, internal purges, monastic orders. None of these things seemed to work. But God again raised up to his glory men who proclaimed the truth of his sovereignty, the truth of God's grace. In proclaiming this truth they brought a multitude of the children of God into a new sense of their dependence upon and relationship to Christ. In proclaiming this truth they benefited even the very people who opposed them in the tradition of the church. They are small, these men of the Reformation. They had little money, little power and little influence. One was a portly little monk in Germany. Another was a frail little professor in Geneva. A third was a ruddy but lowly little man in Scotland. What could they do? In themselves, nothing. But by the power of God they shook the world.

> Radically corrupted, but sovereignly purified! Radically enslaved, but sovereignly emancipated! Radically unable, but sovereignly empowered!

"These men were the blessing of God for our world.

"To God alone be glory!" To those who do not know God that is perhaps the most foolish of all statements. But to those who do know

God, to those who are being saved, it is not only a right statement, it is a happy, wise, true, inescapable, and highly desirable confession. It is our glory to make it. "To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Romans, Volume 4

The New Humanity (Romans 12-16)

*To **HIM***

> *who is able to establish you*
> *by this gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ... to the only wise God.*

Preface

It is always deeply satisfying to come to the end of an important task, especially one that has taken a long time, as these expositions of Paul's letter to the Romans have for me. I began teaching through the Book of Romans in the fall of 1986 and worked on these studies as the major part of my weekly preaching ministry at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for the next eight years. Two years of preaching have gone into each of the four volumes of the series.

But it is not only a sense of satisfaction I feel as I come to the close of this work. I have a deep gratitude to God for allowing me to finish such an important and lengthy exposition, and also anticipation of what God may be pleased to accomplish through it in the lives of those who will be helped into the great doctrines of the Epistle by this gateway.

We live in mindless times, a point I make extensively in the studies dealing with Romans 12:1-2. This is because of the fast pace of modern life, which does not give people sufficient time to think; our materialism, which binds us to things rather than freeing our minds for ideas; skepticism in philosophy, which tells us that there is nothing to be gained by thinking anyway; and above all the pervasiveness of

television, which is destructive to rational thought processes. But we need to think! And we need to think biblically! This is why the last section of Paul's letter (chapters 12-16), dealing with the application of the gospel treated in earlier chapters to various aspects of our lives, begins with the need for mind renewal. Paul knew that if we are to act as Christians we must first learn to think as Christians, since how we think will determine what we do.

In our day people do not think deeply and seldom think about the truths of Christianity. Unbelievers move through life in a spiritual daze unaware that they have precious but impoverished and dying souls. Believers are often in a daze too. There is very little measurable difference in thought and action between believers and their unbelieving counterparts. One observer of the contemporary scene says that God lies weightlessly upon them and that Christian doctrines seem to have no consequences.

If a study of this nature helps people begin thinking about the great doctrines of Christianity and what they should mean for the living of our daily lives, then the benefit to them, their families, and their churches could be enormous. It is certainly what Paul intended when he wrote these chapters.

Think of what Paul covers in this application section. He writes about the need for mind renewal in 12:1-2; the Christian's relationship to other people, especially the need for love, in 12:3-21; issues involving the role of the state and a believer's relationship to it in 13:1-7; the law of love in 13:8-14; and Christian liberty, particularly how those who think they are theologically and spiritually strong are to treat their "weaker" brothers, in 14:1-15:33. Then there are closing sections dealing with Paul's plans for future ministry in 15:14-33, and final greetings from Christians in the church at Corinth to Christians in the church at Rome in 16:1-27.

It would make a tremendous difference to the lives of our churches and the impact of Christians on our world if we would just master and live by these teachings.

In each of my books I thank the elders and congregation of Tenth Presbyterian Church who encourage me to spend so much of my time in sermon preparation. Not all ministers have an inclination to study, nor are they encouraged by their congregations to spend substantial time doing it. I have had the benefit of this encouragement and have tried to take advantage of the time given. I believe this has been beneficial to the church, and I know has been beneficial to me.

Twice in the last two sections of Romans Paul writes that the goal of all things must be the glory of God. At the end of chapter eleven he says, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36). At the end of chapter 16 he likewise declares, "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Rom. 16:27). That is the purpose of all things, and it was Paul's deepest desire that everything he did and every thought he had might be to the glory of the great, sovereign, wise, holy, and compassionate God who had saved him through the gospel of his Son, Jesus Christ.

That is my desire too. And it is my special desire for this specific attempt to teach Romans. May God bless it to many people now and for many years to come. May it help them to come to know him better and obey him. To God alone be the glory.

Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania

Part Sixteen. Applied Christianity

Chapter 180.
How Should We Then Live?

Romans 12:1-2

With the start of chapter 12 we come in our study of Paul's letter to the practical section of the book. I am sure it is a point for which many readers have been eagerly waiting, since ours is a practical age and most people want practical teaching. But I begin by saying that I do not like this way of talking about the material in chapters 12-16. This is because to call these chapters practical suggests that the doctrinal sections are not practical, and whenever we find ourselves thinking along those lines we are making a mistake and contributing to great misunderstanding.

Doctrine is practical, and practical material must be doctrinal if it is to be of any help at all. A far better way to talk about Romans 12-16 is to say that these chapters contain applications of the very practical teaching Paul presented earlier.

John Murray, one of the best modern interpreters of Romans, uses the word *application* in his introduction to this section of the book. He says, "At this point the apostle comes to deal with concrete practical application."

Perhaps an even better word is *consequences.* It occurs to me because of the compelling slogan of the Hillsdale College newsletter, *Imprimis:* "Because Ideas Have Consequences." We have had lots of ideas in the first great sections of Romans—truthful ideas, stirring ideas, ideas that have come to us by means of an inerrant and authoritative revelation. Now we are to explore their many important consequences.

Whose Values? And Why?

Let me make this point still another way by saying that this is the significance of the word *then* in the title of Francis Schaeffer's well-known study of the rise and fall of western culture, *How Should We Then Live?* Schaeffer had a gift for using words well, and this is nowhere seen more clearly than in this book's title. *Then* is a very simple word. We hardly think twice about our use of it. But when you reflect on the word in *How Should We Then Live?* it is clear at once that it is the most important word. Suppose the book were called *How Should We Live?* There would be nothing remarkable about that. How should we live? is a common question. It's not much different from asking, What shall we do today? or Where shall we have dinner tonight? But put *then* into the title, and the question becomes, How shall we live in light of the fact that God has redeemed us from sin's penalty by the death of Jesus Christ and freed us from sin's tyranny by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Schaeffer is very clear about where he thinks Western culture is headed. He looks at such current trends as increasing economic breakdown, violence in all areas of life and all countries, extreme poverty for many of the Third World's peoples, a love of affluence, and the underlying relativism of Western thought. He concludes that the choice before us is either totalitarianism—an imposed but arbitrary social order—or "once again affirming that base which gave freedom without chaos in the first place—God's revelation in the Bible and his revelation through Christ."

Schaeffer's point is that those who have received this revelation must also act upon it, because that is the very nature of the revelation. It demands application. Writes Schaeffer, "As Christians we are not only to *know* the right world view, the world view that tells us the truth of what *is,* but consciously to *act* upon that world view so as to influence society in all its parts and facets across the whole spectrum of life, as much as we can to the extent of our individual and collective ability."

We are hearing a great deal about "family values" today, particularly in popular political campaigns. It was a Republican theme in the 1992 campaign, because the Republicans were using it to question Bill Clinton's morality. I believe in family values. I also supported Dan

Quayle in what he said about them in that campaign. I think he wanted the right thing. But I must add that in the current political climate an appeal to "family values" without a corresponding acknowledgment of God's existence, God's law, and biblical revelation as a basis for all values will always have a hollow ring and sound purely political and manipulative.

Unless we acknowledge God and God's saving acts as the source and basis for our values, anyone who thinks clearly may refute our concern with such questions as these: What kind of family values are we talking about? A nuclear family? A single-parent family? A homosexual family? Why should any one be preferred above another? Or why should we want families at all? In other words, the call for values always invites these rejoinders: Whose values are we taking about? and Why those?

During a meeting of college educators at Harvard University in 1987, President Frank Rhodes of Cornell University suggested in an address on educational reforms that it was time for the universities to pay attention to values and the students' "moral well-being."

At once there were gasps from the audience, and one student jumped to his feet, demanding indignantly, "Whose values are to be taught? And who is to teach us?" The audience applauded loudly, which meant that in its judgment the student had rendered the president's suggestion foolish by these unanswerable questions.

President Rhodes sat down without even trying to answer them.

A generation or so ago, it would have been natural for an educator to at least point to the accumulated wisdom of more than two millennia of Western history—to the writings of philosophers like Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle and to historians and modern thinkers, even if not to the Bible, though many would have included it as well. It is for a return to precisely this type of education that Allan Bloom called so eloquently in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*. But all this has been forfeited today, as President Rhodes's capitulation showed. And it is not

just that times have changed or that people today are skeptical. The problem is that without the absolutes provided by God's revelation of himself and his ways, all views are relative and there is no real reason for doing one thing rather than another—except for selfish, personal reasons, which obviously destroy morality rather than establish it. In other words, our days have become like the times of the Jewish judges when there was no king, the law was forgotten and, as a result, "everyone did as he [or she] saw fit" (Judg. 21:25).

If revelation is the basis for social morality and ethics, then it is impossible to have valid, effective or lasting morals without it. We must have Romans 1-11 in order to have Romans 1216.

John Calvin spoke about this at the start of his lectures on Romans 12, only he was comparing Christianity and philosophy. He said, "This is the main difference between the Gospel and philosophy. Although the philosophers speak on the subject of morals splendidly and with praiseworthy ability, yet all the embellishment which shines forth in their precepts is nothing more than a beautiful superstructure without a foundation, for by omitting principles, they propound a mutilated doctrine, like a body without a head.... Paul [in Romans 12:1-2] lays down the principle from which all the parts of holiness flow."

"Therefore"

Above I commented on Francis Schaeffer's *How Should We Then Live?*, saying that *then* is the all-important word. When we come to the first verse of Romans 12 we discover exactly the same thing, only in this case the important word is *therefore.* "*Therefore,* I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices." Paul means, "In view of what I have just been writing, you must not live for yourselves but rather give yourselves wholly to God."

I am sure you have heard some teacher say at one time or another that when you come to the word "therefore" in the Bible you should always pay close attention to it, because it is "there for" a purpose. *Therefore always* points back to something else, and this means that we can never

understand the importance of what is coming or the connection between what is coming and what has been said until we know exactly what the "therefore" is referring to. We have already had to think this through several times in our study of Romans, because a couple of important *therefores* have already occurred: in 2:1, basing the condemnation of the allegedly moral person on the failure of the entire race as described in Romans 1; and in 5:1, linking the permanence of God's saving work as expounded in Romans 5-8 to the nature of that work as described in Romans 3 and 4.

These earlier *therefores* were important, but the *therefore* of 12:1 is more significant still.

What does the *therefore* of Romans 12:1 refer to? The immediately preceding verses, the doxology that ends Romans 11? The whole of the eleventh chapter, in which Paul explains the wisdom of God's saving acts in history and argues for the eventual restoration of Israel? Chapter 8, with its stirring assertion that nothing in heaven or earth will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Or, to go back even further, the doctrine of justification by faith expounded in chapters 1-4?

There have been able defenders of each of these views, and with reason. Each can be defended by good arguments.

One summer, after I had been teaching the Book of Romans to a group of teaching leaders from Bible Study Fellowship, I received a letter in which a woman thanked me for the series and explained how she had come to understand the importance of God's grace in election for the first time. She wrote that for years she had considered election strange and dangerous but that her eyes had been opened. She wrote, "Not only was my mind opened, my heart was touched. The tears were impossible to restrict several times as I realized what a privileged and totally undeserving recipient of his grace I am. I can hardly believe what a gift I have received from him. It truly brings me to say, 'Yes, yes, yes' to Romans 12:1-2. It's the very least and only rational thing we can do in light of God's unimaginable gift."

This woman was moved by the doctrine of election, which is taught in Romans 9-11. But the answer to what the *therefore* of Romans 12:1 refers is probably *everything* in Romans that precedes it.

Charles Hodge summarizes this way: "All the doctrines of justification, grace, election, and final salvation, taught in the preceding part of the epistle, are made the foundation for the practical duties enjoined in this."

This is Paul's normal pattern in his letters, of course. In the Book of Ephesians the first three doctrinal chapters are followed by three chapters dealing with spiritual gifts, morality, personal relationships, and spiritual warfare. In Galatians the doctrinal section in chapters 3 and 4 is followed in chapters 5 and 6 by material on Christian liberty, spiritual fruit, love, and the obligation to do good. In Colossians the doctrinal material is in 1:1-2:5. The application is in 2:54:18. The same pattern occurs in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It is also in 1 and 2 Corinthians and Philippians, though it is not so apparent in those books. (Strikingly, this does not seem to be the case with the other New Testament writers, such as Peter and John. It seems to have been unique to Paul.)

Leon Morris says, "It is fundamental to [Paul] that the justified man does not live in the same way as the unrepentant sinner."

Outline of Chapters 12-16

Therefore is a linking word, as I have said. We have looked back to what it refers to. Now we should look forward to see what the doctrinal material of chapters 1-11 connects with. In this fourth volume of studies I am handling it in seven sections.

1. *Applied Christianity (12:1-2).* Just as God is the basis of reality so that everything flows from him and takes its form from him ("For from him and through him and to him are all things," Rom. 11:36), so also our relationship to God is the basis of all other relationships and our duty to him the basis of all other duties. Because this is so, Paul sets out the principles that should govern our relationship to God in verses 1 and 2. He reminds us that we are not our own and

that we should therefore present ourselves to God as willing and living sacrifices.

2. *The Christian and other people (12:3-21).* There are three basic areas of application for the gospel, and they each involve relationships. The first two verses have outlined the right relationship of a Christian to God. The remainder of the chapter shows us: (1) the right relationship of a Christian to himself (he is not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but rather to be humble) and (2) the right relationship of a Christian to other people. The first is treated briefly, in verse 3. The second is dealt with at greater length, in verses 4-21.

3. *Church and state (13:1-7).* The Christian does not have a relationship only to other individuals, however. He also has a relationship to institutions, particularly the state. What is the believer's relationship to the state to be? Is he to oppose it as an incorrigibly secular and godless entity? Is he to try to escape from it? Should the Christian submit to it? If we are to submit, is that submission to be without any qualification, regardless of what the state may do or ask us to do? Or are there limits? If there are limits, what are they? We know from history that these became very important matters for the early Christians, especially in the years when the emperors persecuted them, trying to abolish Christianity.

Paul answers many of these questions in the first half of chapter 13, providing a strong case for the validity and worth of secular governments.

4. *The law of love (13:8-14).* Jesus said that the sum of morality is this: (1) that we love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength and (2) that we love our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Matt. 22:34-40). Paul, who seems to reflect the explicit teaching of Jesus many times in these chapters, unfolds what that means in this section.

5. *Christian liberty (14:1-15:13).* The longest part of these final chapters concerns Christian liberty. At first glance this seems surprising, given the many great personal, social, and cultural problems that existed in Paul's day as well as our own. Why did Paul not condemn slavery, develop a Christian view of economics, or comment on war? We cannot know with certainty why Paul chose to ignore these matters and address others, but his decision to deal with personal liberty at least indicates how important this matter was for him. He does not allow Christians to disobey God's moral law, and he offers no low standard of ethics. The standard is the highest: the yielding of our entire selves to God as living sacrifices. But Paul was nevertheless firmly opposed to one group of Christians imposing extrabiblical (or nonbiblical) standards on other Christians.

The fact that Paul wrote the entire letter to the Galatians to defend the believer's liberty shows how strongly he felt about this. His advice to the Galatians was to "stand firm" in the liberty Christ has given us and not to be "burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

6. *Paul's personal ministry and plans (15:14-33).* Having discussed the believer's personal liberty, Paul drops his ethical counsel and writes of his future plans. In these verses he picks up on matters he introduced at the start of the letter, explaining that he wants to come to Rome, why he has been hindered in coming earlier, and what he hopes to receive from the Romans when he does get to them.

7. *Final greetings (16:1-27).* The last chapter of the book is often overlooked as little more than a list of names, but it is more important than that. The names in this chapter reveal much about the churches in Rome and Corinth and show how involved Paul was with the individuals who made up these early Christian communities. They show that Paul himself practiced the concern for others that he has been urging all along.

The New Humanity

As we plunge into the great forest of these remaining chapters we shall be looking very closely at the trees. But in this study we have been doing something equally valuable. We have been looking at the forest, and the bottom line of our study is that truth is a whole. Since we are talking about God's saving work for us, this means that everything God has done for us in salvation has bearing on everything we should do, on all of life. We must be different people because God has saved us from our sins.

And Christians are different. A number of years ago the Gallup Poll organization devised a scale to sort out those for whom religion seemed to be important and find out if it made any difference in their lives. America claims to be a very religious country, but the nation is increasingly immoral. Gallup wanted to know if serious religion made a difference for those who considered themselves to be "highly spiritually motivated" or committed.

He found that 12.5 percent of Americans are in this category, one person in eight. And he found that they really are different, so much so that he called them "a breed apart." He found that these people differed from the rest of the population in at least four key areas:

1. They are more satisfied with their lot in life. They are happier. Sixty-eight percent say they are "very happy" as compared with only 30 percent of those who are uncommitted.
2. Their families are stronger. The divorce rate among this group is far lower than among the less committed.
3. They tend to be more tolerant of persons of different races and religions. This is exactly opposite from what the media suggest when dealing with religion or religious leaders.
4. They are more involved in charitable activities than are their counterparts. A total of 46 percent of the highly spiritually

> committed say they are presently working among the poor, the infirm, and the elderly, compared to only 36 percent among the moderately committed, 28 percent among the moderately uncommitted, and 22 percent among the highly uncommitted.

True conversion makes a difference in a person's life. If there are no differences, there is no genuine conversion. These differences are explained in the remaining chapters of this letter. Laws in themselves change little. Changed people change everything. And the only thing that ever really changes people is God himself through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. If you have been called to faith in Jesus Christ, you are part of a radically changed community, the new humanity. It is your privilege to begin to make changes in our world.

Chapter 181.
Dying, We Live

Romans 12:1

I do not like the word *paradox* used in reference to Christian teachings, because to most people the word refers to something that is self-contradictory or false. Christianity is not false. But the dictionary also defines *paradox* as a statement that *seems* to be contradictory yet may be true in fact, and in that sense there are paradoxes in Christianity. The most obvious is the doctrine of the Trinity. We speak of one God, but we also say that God exists in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We know the doctrine of the Trinity is true because God has revealed it to be true, but we are foolish if we think we can understand or explain it fully.

One of the great paradoxes of Christianity concerns the Christian life: We must die in order to live. We find this teaching many places in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, but the basic, foundational statement is by Jesus, who said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For

whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

It was these words that inspired this well-known prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi:

> O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
> Seek to be consoled as to console,
> To be understood as to understand,
> To be loved as to love.
> For it is by giving that we receive.
> It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
> And it is by dying that we are born to eternal life.

I would not vouch for the theology implied in each of those impassioned sentences, but as a statement of principles governing the Christian life they are helpful.

More important, they are an expression of what Paul sets down at the start of Romans 12 as a first principle for learning to live the Christian life—self-sacrifice. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." In Paul's culture a sacrifice was always an animal that was presented to a priest to be killed. So Paul is saying by this striking metaphor that the Christian life begins by offering ourselves to God for death. The paradox is that by offering ourselves to God we are enabled to live for him.

Therefore, it is by dying that we are enabled to live, period. For as Jesus said, trying to live, if it is living for ourselves, is actually death, while dying to self is actually the way to full living. What should we call this paradox? I call it "life-by-dying" or, as I have titled this study, "Dying, We Live."

Bought at a Price

This principle is so foundational to the doctrine of the Christian life that we must be very careful to lay it out correctly. After that we will go on to look at (1) the specific nature of this sacrifice, that it is an offering of

our bodies presented to God as something holy and pleasing to him and (2) the specific motive for this sacrifice—why we should make it.

The first truth of this foundational teaching is that we are not our own but rather belong to Jesus, if we are truly Christians. Here is the way Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Again, just a chapter later, he says: "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor. 7:23). Then, if we ask what that price is, well, the apostle Peter tells us in his first letter: "You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In that passage Peter uses the important word *redemption*, which means to buy back or to be bought again. It is one of the key words for describing what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished for us by his death on the cross.

Since *redemption* refers to buying something or someone, the image is of a slave market in which we who are sinners are being offered to whomever will bid the highest price for us. The world is ready to bid, of course, particularly if we are attractive or in some other way seen as valuable. The world bids the world's currency.

It bids *fame*. Some people sell their souls to be famous; they will do almost anything to become well-known.

It bids *wealth.* Millions think that making money is the most important thing any person can do; they think that money will buy anything.

It bids *power.* Masses of people are on a power trip. They will wheel and deal and cheat and even trample on others to get to the top of the pyramid. It bids *sex.* Many have lost nearly everything of value in life for just a moment's indulgence.

But into the midst of this vast marketplace Jesus comes, and the price he bids to rescue enslaved sinners is his blood. He offers to die for them. God, who controls this auction, says, "Sold to the Lord Jesus Christ for the price of his blood." As a result we become Jesus' purchased possession and must live for him rather than ourselves, as Paul and Peter indicate.

The great preacher and biblical theologian John Calvin said rightly and precisely, "We are redeemed by the Lord for the purpose of consecrating ourselves and all our members to him."

We need to remember that we are in the application section of Romans. Redemption was introduced earlier in the book, in chapter 3 (v. 24). So what we are finding here is an example of the truth that doctrine is practical and that practical material must be doctrinal if it is to be of any help at all. We are dealing with the practical question of "How should we then live?" But the very first thing to be said to explain how we should live is the meaning and implication of redemption. In other words, we cannot have true Christian living without the gospel.

Death to Our Past

Redemption from sin by Christ is not the only doctrine the Christian life of self-sacrifice is built on, however. A second truth is that we have died to the past by becoming new creatures in Christ, if we are truly converted. We studied this teaching in Romans 6, where Paul argued that because we have "died to sin" we are unable to "live in it any longer" (v. 2). Therefore, instead of offering the parts of our bodies "to sin, as instruments of wickedness," as we used to do, we must instead offer ourselves "to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and... the parts of [our] bodies to him as instruments of righteousness" (Rom. 6:13).

When we studied this passage earlier I pointed out that it does not mean that we have become unresponsive to sin or that we should die to it or that we are dying to it day by day or that we have died to sin's guilt. The verb *die* is an aorist, which refers to something that has been done once

for all. Here it refers to the change that has come about as a result of our being saved. "We died to sin" means that as a result of our union with Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit we have become new creatures in Christ so that we can never go back to being what we were. We are to start the Christian life with that knowledge. If we cannot go back, then we must go forward.

Let me review this teaching by summarizing what I wrote in my study of Romans 6:11 in volume 2. Dying to sin does not mean:

1. That it is my duty to die to sin.
2. That I am commanded to die to sin.
3. That I am to consider sin as a dead force within me.
4. That I am dead to sin so long as I am gaining mastery over it.
5. That sin in me has been eradicated.
6. That counting myself dead to sin makes me insensitive to it.

What Paul is saying is that we have already died to sin in the sense that we cannot successfully return to our old lives. Therefore, since that is true, we might as well get on with the task of living for the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to forget about sinning and instead present our bodies as "living sacrifices" to God.

Dying to Live

The third foundational teaching for what it means to live by dying is the paradox itself, namely that it is by dying to our own desires in order to serve Christ that we actually learn to live.

It is not difficult to understand what this means. We understand only too well that dying to self means putting personal desires behind us in order to put the desires of God for us and the needs of other people first. We understand the promise too! If we do this, we will experience a full and rewarding life. We will be happy Christians. The problem is not with our understanding. The problem is that we do not believe it, or at least

not in regard to ourselves. We think that if we deny ourselves, we will be miserable. Yet this is nothing less than disbelieving God. It is a failure of faith.

So I ask, Who are you willing to believe? Yourself, as reinforced by the world and its way of thinking? Or Jesus Christ?

I say Jesus specifically because I want to remind you of his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. He speaks there about how to be happy. Indeed, the word is even stronger than that. It is the powerful word *blessed*, meaning to be favored by God:

> *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
> *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
> *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
> *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*
> *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*
> *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*
> *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
>
> *Matthew 5:3-10*

We call these statements the Beatitudes, which means the way to happiness or blessing. But this is not the way the world thinks one finds happiness. If a director of one of today's popular television sitcoms or the editor of a widely circulating fashion magazine were to rewrite the Beatitudes from a contemporary point of view, I suppose they would go like this: "Blessed are the rich, for they can have all they want; blessed are the powerful, for they can control others; blessed are the sexually liberated, for they can fully satisfy themselves; blessed are the famous, because they are envied." Isn't that the world's way, the way even Christians sometimes try to go, rather than the way of sacrifice?

But think it through carefully. The world promises blessings for those who follow these standards. But is this what they find? Do they actually find happiness?

Take for example a person who thinks that the way to happiness is wealth. He sets his heart on earning one hundred thousand dollars. He gets it, but he is not happy. He raises his goal to two hundred thousand dollars. When he gets that he tries to accumulate a million dollars, but still he is not happy. John D. Rockefeller, one of the richest men in the world in his day, was asked on one occasion, "How much money is enough?"

He was honest enough to answer wryly, "Just a little bit more."

A Texas millionaire once said, "I thought money could buy happiness. I have been miserably disillusioned."

Another person thinks that he will find happiness through power, so he goes into politics, where he thinks power lies. He runs in a local election and wins. After that he sets his sight on a congressional seat, then on a place in the Senate. If he is talented enough and the circumstances are favorable, he wants to be president. But power never satisfies. One of the world's great statesmen once told Billy Graham, "I am an old man. Life has lost all meaning. I am ready to take a fateful leap into the unknown."

Still another person tries the path of sexual liberation. She launches into the swinging singles scene, where the average week consists of "happy hours," Friday night parties, weekend overnight escapes into the country, and a rapid exchange of partners. But it does not work. Several years ago CBS did a television documentary on the swinging singles lifestyle in southern California, interviewing about half a dozen women who all said essentially the same thing: "We were told that this was the fun way to live, but all the men want to do is get in bed with you. We have had enough of that to last a lifetime."

Does the world's "me first" philosophy lead to happiness? Is personal indulgence the answer? You do not have to be a genius to see through

that facade. It is an empty promise. Paul calls it "a lie" (Rom. 1:25).

So wake up, Christian. And listen to Paul when he pleads, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:1-2).

God does not lie. His word is utterly reliable. You will find his way to be "good, pleasing, and perfect" if you will bend to it.

The Victim and the Priest

That brings us to the fourth and final foundational truth. The first two concerned what God has done for us in redeeming us and joining us to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit so that we become new creatures. The third point was the apparent paradox: life by dying. This last point is an urgent appeal for us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God. This is not done for us. It is something we must do.

This is the "obedience that comes from faith" that Paul wrote about early in the letter, saying, "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 1:5). So again we are back to one of the great doctrinal teachings.

What an interesting mental picture Paul creates for us in Romans 12:1. A sacrifice is something offered to God by a priest. A priest would take a sacrifice offered by a worshiper, carry it to the altar, kill it, pour out the blood, and then burn the victim's body. In that procedure the priest and the offering were two separate entities. But in this arresting image of what it is to live a genuinely Christian life, Paul shows that the priest and the offering are the same. Furthermore, we are the priests who present the offering, and the offerings we present are our own bodies.

Is there a model for this in Scripture? Of course. It is the model of Jesus himself, for he was both the sacrifice and the priest who made the sacrifice. We have a statement of this in one of our great communion hymns, translated from a sixth-century Latin text by the Scotsman Robert Campbell in 1849:

> At the Lamb's high feast we sing
> Praise to our victorious King,
> Who hath washed us in the tide
> Flowing from his pierced side;
> Praise we him whose love divine
> Gives his sacred blood for wine,
> Gives his body for the feast,
> Christ the Victim, Christ the Priest.

Yes, there is an enormous difference between the sacrifice Jesus made for us and our own sacrifices of ourselves. Jesus' sacrifice was an atoning sacrifice. He died in our place, bearing the punishment of God for our sin so that we might not have to bear it. His death was substitutionary. Our sacrifices are not at all like that. They are not an atonement for sin in any sense. Still, they are like Christ's sacrifice in that we are the ones who make them and that the sacrifices we offer are ourselves.

Another distinction is that in the Old Testament the priests made different kinds of sacrifices. There were sacrifices for sin, of course; they looked forward to the death of Jesus Christ and explained it as a substitutionary atonement. These were fulfilled by Jesus' death and are not repeatable. In this sense "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all," as the author of Hebrews says (Heb. 10:10). But in addition to the sacrifices for sin there were also sacrifices of thanksgiving, offerings by worshipers who simply wanted to thank God for some great blessing or deliverance. It is this kind of a sacrifice that we offer when we offer God ourselves.

Sacrifice is an utterly unpleasant word in our day! No one wants to be a sacrifice. In fact, people do not want to sacrifice even a single little thing. We want to acquire things instead.
Nevertheless, this is where the Christian life starts. It is God's instruction and desire for us, and it is "good, pleasing and perfect" even if it does not seem to be.

Will you trust God that he knows what he is doing? Will you believe him in this as in other matters? If you will believe him, you will do exactly what Paul urges you to do in Romans 12. You will offer your body as a "living sacrifice" to God and thereby prove that his will for you is indeed perfect.

Chapter 182.
Living Sacrifice: Its Nature

Romans 12:1

Not long ago I reread parts of Charles Dickens's wonderful historical novel, *A Tale of Two*
Cities. The cities are Paris and London, of course, and the story is set in the years of the French Revolution when thousands of innocent people were being executed on the guillotine by followers of the revolution. As usual with Dickens's stories, the plot is complex, but it reaches a never-to-be-forgotten climax when Sydney Carton, the disreputable character in the story, substitutes himself for his friend Charles Darney, who is being held for execution in the Bastille prison. Darney, who has been condemned to die, goes free, and Carton goes to the scaffold for him, saying, "It is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to, than I have ever known." The tale is so well written that it still moves me to tears every time I read it.

Few things move us to hushed awe so much as a person's sacrifice of his or her life for someone else. It is the ultimate proof of true love.

We are to sacrifice ourselves for Jesus if we love him. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), and he did it for us. The sacrifice of Sydney Carton for his friend Darney is only a story, albeit a moving one, but Jesus actually died on the cross for our salvation. Now, because he loved us and gave himself for us, we who love him are likewise to give ourselves to him as "living sacrifices."

But there is a tremendous difference. As I said in the last study, Jesus died in our place, bearing the punishment of God for our sin so that we would not have to bear it. Our sacrifices are not at all like that. They are not an atonement for sin in any sense. But they are like Christ's in this at least, that we are the ones who make them and that the sacrifices we make are ourselves. It is what Paul is talking about in Romans 12 when he writes, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1).

I introduced the matter of sacrifice in the last chapter. In this study I want to explore what exactly is meant by sacrifice, and how we are to do it.

Living Sacrifices

The first point is the obvious one: The sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead one. This was quite a novel idea in Paul's day, when sacrifices were always killed. The animal was brought to the priest. The sins of the person bringing the sacrifice were confessed over the animal, thereby transferring them to it symbolically. Then the animal was put to death. It was a vivid way of reminding everyone that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and that the salvation of sinners is by substitution. In these sacrifices the animal died in place of the worshiper. It died so that he or she might not have to die. But now, with a burst of divinely inspired creativity, Paul reveals that the sacrifices we are to offer are not to be dead but rather living. We are to offer our lives to God so that, as a

result, we might "no longer live for [ourselves] but for him who died for [us] and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:15).

We are to be living sacrifices, yes. But with what life? Certainly not our old sinful lives in which, when we lived in them, we were dead already. Rather, we are to offer our new spiritual lives that have been given to us by Christ.

Robert Smith Candlish was a Scottish pastor who lived over a hundred years ago (1806-73) and who left us some marvelous studies of the Bible. In his study of Romans 12, he reflects on the nature of the life we are to offer God. "What life?" he asks. "Not merely animal life, the life that is common to all sentient and moving creatures; not merely, in addition to that, intelligent life, the life that characterizes all beings capable of thought and voluntary choice; but spiritual life: life in the highest sense; the very life which those on whose behalf the sacrifice of atonement is presented lost, when they fell into that state which makes a sacrifice of atonement necessary."

What this means, among other things, is that we must be Christians if we are to give ourselves to God as he requires. Other people may give God their money or time or even take up a religious vocation, but only a Christian can give back to God that new spiritual life in Christ that he has first been given. Indeed, it is only because we have been made alive in Christ that we are able to do this or even want to.

Offering Our Bodies

The second thing we need to see about the nature of the sacrifice God requires is that it involves the giving to God of our bodies. Some of the earlier commentators stress that offering our bodies really means offering ourselves, all we are. Calvin wrote, "By *bodies* he means not only our skin and bones, but the totality of which we are composed." But although it is true that we are to offer God all we are, most commentators today rightly refuse to pass over the word *bodies* quite this easily because they recognize how much the Bible stresses the importance of our bodies.

For example, Leon Morris says, "Paul surely expected Christians to offer to God not only their bodies but their whole selves.... But we should bear in mind that the body is very important in the Christian understanding of things. Our bodies may be 'implements of righteousness' (6:13) and 'members of Christ' (1 Cor. 6:15). The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19); Paul can speak of being 'holy both in body and in spirit' (1 Cor. 7:34). He knows that there are possibilities of evil in the body but that in the believer 'the body of sin' has been brought to nothing (6:6)."

In a similar manner, Robert Haldane says, "It is of the body that the apostle here speaks, and it is not proper to extract out of his language more than it contains.... This shows the importance of serving God with the body as well as with the soul."

Paul does not elaborate upon what he means by presenting our bodies to God as living sacrifices in Romans 12, but has already presented this idea in chapter 6. There he said, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace"
(vv. 12-14). Paul is making the same point there, where he first begins to talk about sanctification, that he makes in 12:1—we are to serve God by offering him our bodies.

Sin can control us through our bodies, but it does not need to. So rather than offering our bodies as instruments of sin, we are to offer God our bodies as instruments for doing his will. This concerns specific body parts.

1. *Our minds.* Although we often think of our minds as separate from our bodies, our minds actually are parts of our bodies and the victory we need to achieve begins here. I will not dwell on this here because I will be treating it more fully later when I talk about

mind renewal. But I remind you that this is the point at which Paul himself begins in verse 2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by *the renewing of your mind*."

Have you ever considered that what you do with your mind will determine a great deal of what you will become as a Christian? If you fill your mind only with the products of our secular culture, you will remain secular and sinful. If you fill your head with trashy novels, you will begin to live like the characters you read about. If you do nothing but watch television, you will begin to act like the scoundrels on television. On the other hand, if you feed your mind on the Bible and Christian books, train it by godly conversation, and discipline it to critique what you see and hear by applying biblical truths to the world's ideas, you will grow in godliness and become increasingly useful to God.

When I wrote on this subject in my earlier study of Romans 6:12-14, I set out a simple goal in this area: "For every secular book you read, make it your goal also to read one good Christian book, a book that can stretch your mind spiritually."

2. *Our eyes and ears.* The mind is not the only part of our body by which we receive impressions and that must therefore be offered to God as an instrument of righteousness. We also receive impressions through our eyes and ears, and these must be surrendered to God too.

Sociologists tell us that by the age of twenty-one the average young person has been bombarded by three hundred thousand commercial messages, all arguing from the assumption that personal gratification is the dominant goal in life. Television and other modern means of communication put the acquisition of things before godliness; in fact, they never mention godliness at all. How are you going to grow in godliness if you are constantly watching television or reading printed ads or listening to secular radio?

I am not advocating an evangelical monasticism in which we retreat from the culture, though it is far better to retreat from it than perish in it. But somehow the secular input must be counterbalanced by the spiritual. As I wrote earlier, "Another simple goal might be for you to spend as many hours studying your Bible, praying, and going to church as watching television."

3. *Our tongues.* The tongue is also part of our body, and what we do with it is important either for good or evil. James, the Lord's brother, wrote, "The tongue is... a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6). If your tongue is not given to God as an instrument of righteousness in his hands, this will be true of you. You do not need to be a Hitler and plunge the world into armed conflict to do evil with your tongue. A little bit of gossip or slander will suffice.

What you need to do is use your tongue to praise and serve God. For one thing, you should learn how to recite Scripture with it. You probably know the popular songs. Can you not also use your tongue to speak God's words? And how about worship? You should use your tongue to praise God by means of hymns and other Christian songs. Above all, you should use your tongue to witness to others about the person and work of Christ.

Here is another goal for you if you want to grow in godliness: Use your tongue as much to tell others about Jesus as for idle conversation.

4. *Our hands and feet.* There are several important passages about our hands and feet. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul tells us to work with our hands so that we will be self-supporting and not dependent on anybody: "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." In Ephesians 4:28 he tells us to work so that we will have something to give to others who are in need: "He who has been stealing must steal no

longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."

As far as our feet are concerned, in Romans 10 Paul writes of the need others have for the gospel, saying, "How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Rom. 10:14-15).

What do you do with your hands? And where do your feet take you? Do you allow them to take you to where Christ is denied or blasphemed? To where sin is openly practiced? Are you spending most of your free time loitering in the hot singles clubs? You will not grow in godliness there. On the contrary, you will fall from righteous conduct. Let your feet carry you into the company of those who love and serve God. Or, if you go into the world, let it be to serve the world and witness to it in Christ's name. Use your feet and hands for him.

Here is another goal taken from the earlier study: "For every special secular function you attend, determine to attend a Christian function also. And when you attend a secular function, do so as a witness by word and action for the Lord Jesus Christ."

Holiness

The third word Paul uses to indicate the nature of the sacrifices we are to offer God is *holy.* Any sacrifice must be holy, without spot or blemish and consecrated entirely to God. Anything less is an insult to the great and holy God we serve. How much more must we be holy who have been purchased "not with perishable things such as silver or gold... but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Peter wrote, "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). The author of Hebrews said, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

This is the very heart of what we are talking about when we speak of living sacrifices: Holiness is the end of the matter, the point to which the entire Epistle of Romans has been heading. Romans is about salvation. But as someone wise has noted, salvation does not mean that Jesus died to save us *in* our sins but to save us *from* them.

Handley C. G. Moule expressed this well: "As we actually approach the rules of holiness now before us, let us once more recollect what we have seen all along in the Epistle, that holiness is the aim and issue of the entire Gospel. It is indeed an 'evidence of life,' infinitely weighty in the enquiry whether a man knows God indeed and is on the way to his heaven. But it is much more; it is the expression of life; it is the form and action in which life is intended to come out.... We who believe are 'chosen' and 'ordained' to 'bring forth fruit' (John 15:16), fruit much and lasting." I don't think any subject is more generally neglected among evangelicals in America in our day than holiness. Yet there was a time when holiness was a serious pursuit of anyone who called himself or herself a Christian, and how one lived and who one was inside was important.

England's J. I. Packer has written a book called *Rediscovering Holiness* in which he calls attention to this fact: "The Puritans insisted that all life and relationships must become 'holiness to the Lord.' John Wesley told the world that God had raised up methodism 'to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.' Phoebe Palmer, Handley Moule, Andrew Murray, Jessie PennLewis, F. B. Meyer, Oswald Chambers, Horatius Bonar, Amy Carmichael, and L. B. Maxwell are only a few of the leading figures in the 'holiness revival' that touched all evangelical Christendom between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries."

But today? Today holiness is largely forgotten as being important for Christians. We do not try to be holy, and we hardly know what holiness means. And we do not look for holiness in others. The great parish minister and revival preacher Robert Murray McCheyne once said, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness." But pulpit committees hardly look for holiness in a new pastor today. They look for a winsome

personality, communication skills, administrative ability, and other such things.

As for ourselves, we do not seek out books or tapes on holiness or attend seminars designed to draw us closer to God. We want seminars entitled "How to Be Happy," "How to Raise Children," "How to Have a Good Sex Life," "How to Succeed in Business," and so on.

Fortunately, this lack has begun to be noticed by some evangelical leaders who are disturbed by it and have begun to address the subject. I commend Packer's book, as well as a book written several years ago by Jerry Bridges called *The Pursuit of Holiness.* There is also the older classic by the English Bishop John Charles Ryle by the same title.

Pleasing to God

The final word Paul uses to describe how we should present our bodies to God as living sacrifices is *pleasing.* If we do what Paul has urged us to do—offer our "bodies as living sacrifices, holy... to God"—then we will also find that what we have done is pleasing and acceptable to him.

That is an amazing thing to me, that God could find anything we might do to be pleasing. But it is so! I notice that the word *pleasing* occurs twice in this short paragraph. The first time, which is what we are looking at here, it indicates that our offering of ourselves to God pleases God. The second time, at the end of verse 2, it indicates that when we do this we will find God's will for our lives to be pleasing as well as good and perfect. That God's will for me should be pleasing, pleasing to me—that I understand. How could it be otherwise if God is all-wise and all-good? He must will what is good for me. But that my offering of myself to him should somehow also please him when I know myself to be sinful and ignorant and half-hearted even in my best efforts—that is astonishing.

But so it is! The Bible tells me that at my best I am to think of myself as an "unworthy" servant (Luke 17:10). But it also says that if I live for Jesus, offering back to him what he has first given to me, then one day I

will hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!... Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:21).

Living for Christ may be hard. It always will be in this sinful, God-defying world. I may not understand what good it does either for me or for other people. But that commendation, the praise of the Lord Jesus Christ, will be enough for me. It will make it worthwhile.

Chapter 183.
Living Sacrifice: Its Motive

Romans 12:1

What is it that motivates people to be "the best they can be," as the Army recruitment ads say? There are a number of answers.

One way to motivate people is to challenge them. Dale Carnegie, the author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* tells of a mill manager whose workers were not producing. The owner was named Charles Schwab, and he asked the manager what was wrong. "I have no idea," the manager said. "I've coaxed the men; I've pushed them; I've sworn and cussed; I've threatened them with damnation and being fired. Nothing works. They just won't produce." "How many heats did your shift make today?" Schwab asked.

"Six."

Without saying anything else, Schwab picked up a piece of chalk and wrote a big number "6" on the floor. Then he walked away.

When the night shift came in they saw the "6" and asked what it meant. "The big boss was here today," someone said. "He asked how many heats the day shift made, and we told him six. He chalked it on the floor."

The next morning Schwab walked through the mill again. The night shift had rubbed out the "6" and replaced it with an even bigger "7."

When the day shift reported the next day they saw the "7." So the night shift thought they were better than the day shift, did they? They'd show them. They pitched in furiously, and before they had left that evening they had rubbed out the "7" and replaced it with a "10." Schwab had increased production 66 percent in just twenty-four hours simply by throwing down a challenge.

Napoleon said that men are moved by trinkets. He was referring to medals, and he meant that soldiers would risk even death for recognition.

Winston Churchill, the great British statesman and prime minister during the hard days of the Second World War, motivated the British people by his vision of victory and by brilliant speeches. We can remember some of his words today: "blood, toil, tears and sweat," "victory— victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror; victory however long and hard the road may be," "their finest hour."

Moved by Mercy

What is it that motivates Christians to live a Christian life? Or to use Paul's language in Romans 12:1, what is it that motivates them "to offer [their] bodies as living sacrifices... to God"?

If you and I were as rational as we think we are and sometimes claim to be, we would not need any encouragement to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices because it would be the most reasonable thing in the world for us to do it. God is our Creator. He has redeemed us from sin by the death of Jesus Christ. He has made us alive in Christ. He loves us and cares for us. It is reasonable to love God and serve him in return. But we are not as rational as that and do need urging, which is why Paul writes as he does in Romans 12. In verse 1 Paul urges us to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices, and the motivation he provides is God's mercy: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, *in view of God's mercy*, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

Romans 12:1 is an amazing verse. It is one of those portions of the Bible that is literally packed with meaning, which is why I have been trying to unpack it carefully in these opening studies.

I began by studying the word *therefore,* which links the urging of verses 1 and 2 to everything that Paul has already written about in the letter. Next we looked at the idea of sacrifice, finding that in genuine Christianity we live by dying to self, as strange as that may seem. Third, we explored the nature of these sacrifices, seeing that: (1) they are to be living, (2) they involve giving the specific individual parts of our bodies to God for his service, (3) they must be holy, and (4) if they are these things, they will be acceptable to God.

But why should we present our bodies as living sacrifices? The answer is simple: "In view of [or because of] God's mercy." In the Greek text the word *mercy* is plural rather than singular, so the reason for giving ourselves to God is literally because of God's manifold mercies—that is, because he has been good to us in many ways.

This is entirely different from the way the world looks at things. Assuming that people in today's world should even get concerned about living righteously—and it is doubtful that very many could—they would probably say, "The reason to live a moral life is because you are going to get in trouble if you don't." Or to give secular thinking the greatest possible credit, perhaps they might say, "Because it is good for you." That is not what we have here.

In *Rediscovering Holiness,* J. I. Packer says,

The secular world never understands Christian motivation. Faced with the question of what makes Christians tick, unbelievers maintain that Christianity is practiced only out of self-serving purposes. They see Christians as fearing the consequences of not being Christians (religion as fire insurance), or feeling the need of help and support to achieve their goals (religion as a crutch), or wishing to sustain a social identity (religion as a badge of respectability). No doubt all these motivations can be found among the membership of churches: it would be futile to

dispute that. But just as a horse brought into a house is not thereby made human, so a self-seeking motivation brought into the church is not thereby made Christian, nor will holiness ever be the right name for religious routines thus motivated. From the plan of salvation I learn that the true driving force in authentic Christian living is, and ever must be, not the hope of gain, but the heart of gratitude.

That is exactly what Paul is teaching. As John Calvin wrote, "Paul's entreaty teaches us that men will never worship God with a sincere heart, or be roused to fear and obey him with sufficient zeal, until they properly understand how much they are indebted to his mercy."

What Is Mercy?

This is not the first time we have had to think about mercy in studying Romans. Mercy is one of three words often found together: goodness, grace and mercy. *Goodness* is the most general term, involving all that emanates from God: his decrees, his creation, his laws, his providences. It extends to the elect and to the nonelect, though not in the same way. God is good, and everything he does is good. *Grace* denotes favor, particularly toward the undeserving. There is common grace, the kind of favor God shows to all persons in that he sends rain on the just and unjust alike. There is also special, or saving, grace, which is what he shows to those he is saving from their sins. *Mercy* is an aspect of grace, but the unique quality of mercy is that it is given to the pitiful.

Arthur W. Pink says, "Mercy... denotes the ready inclination of God to relieve the misery of fallen creatures. Thus 'mercy' presupposes sin." Let me show how this works by three examples.

In the Beginning

The first is Adam. Try to put yourself in Adam's position at the very beginning of human history and imagine how he must have felt when God came to him in the garden after he and Eve had sinned by eating from the forbidden tree. God had warned Adam about eating, saying, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat

from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). The Hebrew text actually says, "*On the day* you eat of it you will die." But Adam and Eve had eaten of it, and now God had come to them to demand an accounting and pronounce judgment.

"Where are you?" God called.

Adam and his wife had hidden among the trees when they heard God coming; they were terrified. God had said that they would die on the day they ate of the forbidden tree. Eve must have expected to die. Adam must have expected to die. "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid," Adam said.

"Who told you that you were naked?" God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

Adam confessed that he had eaten, though he blamed the woman for getting him to do it.

God addressed the woman. "What is this you have done?" Eve blamed the serpent (Gen. 3:9-13).

At last God began his judgments, beginning with the serpent:

> *Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!*
> *You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.*
> *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;*
> *he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*
>
> *Genesis 3:14-15*

God spoke to Eve next, foretelling pain in childbirth and harsh struggle within the marriage. We call it the battle of the sexes. Finally, God addressed Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food
until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken;
for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Genesis 3:17-19

Imagine yourself in Adam's place, living through what I have described. God had told Adam and Eve that they would die, but they had not died. There had been judgments, of course, consequences. Sin always has consequences. But they had not been struck down; and, in fact, God had even announced the coming of a Redeemer who one day would crush Satan's head and undo his work. Even more, God had illustrated the nature of Christ's atonement by killing animals, the innocent dying for the guilty, and then by clothing Adam and Eve with the animals' skins. It was a picture of imputed righteousness.

Adam must have been overwhelmed by an awareness of God's mercy. Adam deserved to die, but instead of killing him, God spared him and promised a Savior instead.

No wonder Adam then named his wife "Eve," meaning life-giver or mother. It was his way of expressing faith in God's promise, for God had said that it was from the seed of the woman that the Redeemer would come. The memory of God's mercy must have kept Adam looking to God in faith and living for God by faith through his long life from that time forward, for Adam lived to be eight hundred years old and was the father of the line of godly patriarchs that extended from him through his third son Seth to Noah.

The Worst of Sinners

My second example is Paul. In his earlier days Paul was called Saul, and he was a fierce opponent of Christianity. He was a Pharisee, the strictest sect of the Jews, and he was zealous for the traditions of his

fathers. This led him to participate in the martyrdom of Stephen, and he followed that by arresting and otherwise persecuting many of the early Christians. Having done what he could in Jerusalem, Paul obtained letters to the leaders of the synagogues in Damascus and went there to arrest any Christians he could find and carry them off to Jerusalem for trial and possible execution.

On the way Jesus stopped him. There was a bright light from heaven, and when Saul fell to the ground, blinded by the light, he heard a voice speaking to him. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," the voice replied.

At this point Paul must have had feelings similar to those of Adam when God had appeared to him in the garden of Eden. True, God had not told Paul that he would die if he persecuted Christians. He was persecuting them in ignorance, supposing that he was serving God. But he had been terribly mistaken. He had done great harm, and he had even participated in the killing of Stephen. In that first moment of Paul's dawning apprehension, when he recognized that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was speaking to him, he must have thought that Jesus had appeared to him to judge him. He certainly deserved it. He must have expected to have been struck down and to die.

Instead Jesus sent him to Damascus, where he was to be told what he should do. When the message came to him by a disciple named Ananias, it was that he was to be God's "chosen instrument to carry [God's] name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:1-15).

Mercy? I should say it was. Paul never forgot it.

That is why, years later, he could write to his young friend and co-worker Timothy, saying, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so

that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Tim. 1:15-16). It was because he knew himself to be a sinner saved only by the mercy and grace of God that Paul joyfully gave himself to God as a living sacrifice and worked tirelessly to please him.

A Slave of Slaves

My third example is John Newton. Newton ran away to sea as a young boy and eventually went to Africa to participate in the slave trade. His reason for going, as he later wrote in his autobiography, was that he might "sin his fill." Sin he did! But the path of sin is downhill, and Newton's path descended so low that he was eventually reduced to the position of a slave in his master's African compound. This man dealt in slaves, and when he went off on slaving expeditions Newton fell into the hands of the slave trader's African wife, who hated white men and vented her venom on Newton. Newton was forced to eat his food off the dusty floor like a dog, and at one point he was actually placed in chains. Sick and emaciated, he nearly died.

Newton escaped from this form of his slavery eventually. But he was still chained to sin and again went to sea transporting slaves from the west coast of Africa to the New World. It was on his return from one of these slave voyages that Newton was wondrously converted.

The ship was overtaken by a fierce storm in the north Atlantic and was nearly sinking. The rigging was destroyed; water was pouring in. The hands tried to seal the many leaks and brace the siding. Newton was sent down into the hold to pump water. He pumped for days, certain that the ship would sink and that he would be taken under with it and be drowned. As he pumped water in the hold of that ship, God brought to Newton's mind verses he had learned from his mother as a child, and they led to his conversion. When the ship survived the storm and the sailors were again in England, Newton left the slave trade, studied for

the Christian ministry, and finally became a great preacher. He even preached before the queen.

What was Newton's motivation? It was a profound awareness of the grace and mercy of God toward him, a wretched sinner. Newton wrote these words:

> Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—
> That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found— Was blind, but now I see.

Newton never forgot God's mercy to him. Once a friend was complaining about someone who was resistant to the gospel and living a life of great sin. "Sometimes I almost despair of that man," the friend remarked.

"I never did despair of any man since God saved me," said Newton.

In his most advanced years Newton's mind began to fail and he had to stop preaching. But when friends came to visit him he frequently remarked, "I am an old man. My mind is almost gone. But I can remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior." Certainly the mercy of God moved Newton to offer his body as a living sacrifice to God and to seek to please him.

Love So Amazing

Now I come to you. Up to this point I have been asking you to put yourself in the place of Adam, Paul, and John Newton, trying to feel what they must have felt as an awareness of the greatness of the mercy of God swept over them. But if you are a Christian, you should be feeling the same things yourself even without reference to Adam or Paul or other characters.

Ephesians 2 describes your experience. It says that before God revealed his mercy to you, you were "dead in your transgressions and sins" (v. 1). You "followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the

kingdom of the air" (v. 2) and were "by nature [an object of God's] wrath" (v. 3).
"You were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and [a foreigner] to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). That was your condition.

But now listen to what God did.

"Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (vv. 4-7).

That is the nature of the goodness, love, grace, and mercy of our great God. If you are a Christian, shouldn't it motivate you to the most complete offer of your body to him as a living sacrifice and to the highest possible level of obedience and service? How can it do otherwise? In my opinion, you can never understand and accurately appreciate what God has done in showing you mercy in Christ without replying wholeheartedly, as did Isaac Watts in his great hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (1709):

> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Chapter 184.
Service That Makes Sense

Romans 12:1

The Greek words of the last phrase of Romans 12:1 are ambiguous and have been translated different ways. For example, there are two different ways the words *spiritual act of worship* in Romans 12:1 may be understood. The noun translated *worship* is *latreia*, which can mean either service or worship. The plural of *latreia* can even mean rites or

duties. The adjective in this important combination of words is *logikos*, however, which can mean either spiritual or rational, and when it is coupled to the noun two rather different meanings are possible.

One meaning is preserved in the King James Version: "your reasonable service." The newer translation is "your spiritual worship," which appears in the New International Version.

What is it? Is it "reasonable service" or "spiritual act of worship"? One answer is that the Greek words may actually embrace both ideas at the same time, spiritual worship being thought of also as rational service. But if I am forced to make a choice, I find myself siding with John Murray, who notes that "reasonable or rational is a more literal rendering." *Logikos* has given us the English word *logical*, which means reasonable or according to reason, and this should also be the preferred meaning, if for no other reason than because in the next verse Paul talks about
Christians being transformed by "the renewing of [their] mind[s]."

So Paul really is talking about something reasonable, saying that the living sacrifice that he is urging upon us here is logical.

Even more, the service itself is to be performed reasonably, or with the mind. "The service here in view is worshipful service and the apostle characterizes it as 'rational' because it is worship that derives its character as acceptable to God from the fact that it enlists our mind, our reason, our intellect. It is rational in contrast with what is mechanical or automatic.... The lesson to be derived from the term 'rational' is that we are not 'spiritual' in the biblical sense except as the use of our bodies is characterized by conscious, intelligent, consecrated devotion to the service of
God."

To understand these words well we must comprehend two things. First, we must understand the kind of service that is required. Second, we need to see why such demanding service is so reasonable.

Giving God Ourselves

As far as the first of these two matters is concerned, we have already spent a good bit of time exploring what this kind of service is about. It concerns what Paul calls "sacrifice." When we were looking at it in detail earlier we saw that it involves three things. First, it must be a *living* sacrifice. That is, our lives are to be given to God in active, continuing service. Second, it involves the offering of our *bodies.* In other words, we must give God the use of our minds, eyes, ears, tongues, hands, feet, and other body parts. Third, we must be *holy.* Moreover, we saw that if we do this, then the sacrifices we make to God will be *pleasing* to him.

Our problem, of course, is that we do not want to give God ourselves. We will give him things. It is relatively easy to give God money, though even here we are frequently far less than generous. We will even give God a certain amount of our time. We will volunteer for charitable work. But we will not give ourselves. Yet without ourselves these other "gifts" mean nothing to the Almighty.

You will begin to understand the Christian life only when you understand that God does not want your money or your time without yourself. You are the one for whom Jesus died. You are the one he loves. So when the Bible speaks of reasonable service, as it does here, it means that you are the one God wants. It is sad if you try to substitute things for that, the greatest gift.

A wonderful illustration of how we do sometimes substitute things for ourselves is the story of Jacob's return to his own country as related in Genesis 32. He had cheated his brother Esau out of his father Isaac's blessing about twenty years before, and he had been forced to run away because his brother was threatening to kill him. Twenty years is a long time. Over those two decades Jacob had gradually forgotten his brother's threats. But when it came time to go home, which is what this chapter describes, Jacob began to remember the past and grew increasingly fearful of what might happen.

Moving along toward Canaan with Laban behind him and his own country in front of him, Jacob had time to think. He remembered his own disreputable conduct. He recollected Esau's murderous threats. Every step became more difficult. Finally he came to the brook Jabbok that marked the border of his brother's territory, looked across to where Esau lived, and was terrified.
If he could have gone back, he would have. But there was no way to go except forward.

What was he to do?

The first thing he did was send some servants ahead to see if they could find Esau and perhaps get a feeling for what he was planning to do. They had not gone very far when they ran into Esau, who was actually coming to meet Jacob. Unfortunately, he had four hundred men with him. This was a huge army from Jacob's point of view, and he could only assume the worst—that Esau was coming to kill him. He thought quickly, then divided his family, servants, and flocks into two groups, reasoning that if Esau attacked one group, the other might escape.

Ah, but what if Jacob was in the group Esau attacked?

On second thought, that didn't seem to be a very good plan, so he decided to appease his brother with gifts. First he sent him a present of two hundred female goats. He sent a servant along to drive the herd, and he gave the servant these instructions: "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?' then you are to say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us'" (Gen. 32:17-18).

After this he sent another group of twenty male goats, and he gave the servant in charge of this flock the same instructions, to say that they belonged to Jacob and were being sent as a gift to Esau, with Jacob to come after them.

Just in case Esau was not satisfied with the goats, Jacob decided to send two hundred ewes, then twenty rams. After this he sent over the rest of

his livestock: "thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys" (v. 15). Each group had its servants in charge, and to each servant he gave the same message. It must have been an amusing picture—all Jacob's possessions stretched out across the desert going toward Esau.

But there was more. After he had sent the animals Jacob sent his least favored wife Leah with her children ahead of him across the Jabbok, followed by his favored wife Rachel with her children. Then there was the Jabbok. And then there at last, all alone and trembling, was Jacob.

I suppose that if he had known the chorus, he might have been singing "I surrender all." All the goats, that is. All the sheep. All the camels. All the cows. All the bulls. All the donkeys. He had given up everything, but he had still not given himself. That is what some of us do. We tell God that we will give him some time. We volunteer to help with something around the church. We give him our money. We do not give ourselves.

That night the angel came and wrestled with Jacob to bring him to the point of personal submission, after which this scheming, stiff-necked man was never the same again. When is the angel going to come and wrestle with you? Does he need to?

Why Is It Reasonable?

Let's not wait for the angel. Let's deal with this matter of sacrificial service to God now. Let's examine why it is reasonable to serve God sacrificially.

1. *It is reasonable because of what God has already done for us.* We touched on this point in the first of our studies of Romans 12, because it is implied in the word with which Paul begins this final major section of the letter: *therefore. Therefore* refers back to everything Paul said earlier. He discussed our need as sinners. We are under the wrath of God, on a destructive downhill path and unable to help ourselves. Paul has shown that we are not even inclined to help ourselves. Instead of drawing close to God, who is

our only hope, we run away from him, suppressing even the truths about God known from the revelation of himself in nature.

Yet God has not let it go at that. God intervened to save us by the work of Jesus Christ, who died for us, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to understand what Jesus has accomplished, repent of our sin, and trust him for our salvation. Then he has also joined us to Jesus Christ to make us different people from what we were before. Paul expounded on that in the letter's first eleven chapters. So now, when he gets to chapter 12, he says, "Look what God has done. Is it not reasonable to give yourself utterly and sacrificially to a God who has given himself utterly and sacrificially for you?"

Let me make that personal. Are you a believer in Jesus Christ? Are you trusting him for your salvation? Has the Holy Spirit made you alive in Jesus Christ? If he has, what can be more reasonable than to give yourself to him? What is more logical than to serve God wholeheartedly in this way?

2. *It is reasonable because of what God is continuing to do.* The salvation of a Christian is not just a past thing. It is also a present experience, because God is continuing to work in those whom he has brought to faith in Jesus Christ. It is difficult to make changes in our lives, break destructive habits, form new ways of thinking, and please God. But this is exactly what God is doing in us. It is what this text is about. God does not start a thing and abandon it. When God starts something he always brings it to completion. He is doing this with you. Therefore, it is absurd to oppose his purposes. It is futile. The only reasonable thing is to join God and get on with what he is enabling you to do.

3. *It is reasonable because such service is God's will for us, and his is a good, pleasing and perfect will.* This point anticipates Romans 12:2, which says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Christians often get greatly hung up on the idea of discovering what God's specific will is for their lives. There has been great debate on this, some of which I reviewed earlier in my study of Romans 8. In my judgment, there clearly are specific plans for our lives that God had determined in advance, because he has predetermined all things. The difficulty is that he has not revealed these to us. They are part of the hidden counsels of God, and they are not known by us simply because they are hidden. But although these specific details are not made known, general but very important things are, and the most important of these is that God wants us to be like Jesus Christ.

This is what Romans 8:28-29 says. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." This is what Romans 12:2 is getting at as well.

Sometimes we also get hung up on the idea that God's will must be something hard, difficult, or irrational. Paul corrects that error by giving us three adjectives to describe the nature of God's will.

It is *good*, he says. God is the master of the understatement. So if God says his will is good, he means good with a capital *G*. He means that his will for us is the best thing that could possibly be.

God's will is also *acceptable*, says Paul. This means acceptable to us, since the fact that God's will is acceptable to God goes without saying. Do not say that the will of God is hard. Or difficult. Or irrational. If you are thinking along those lines, it is because you have not yet learned to surrender to it. Those who do surrender to God's will, offering their whole selves as sacrifices to him, find that the will of God is the most acceptable thing there can be.

Finally, Paul argues that the will of God is *perfect.* No one can say more than that. Our ways are not perfect. They can always be improved upon and often must be corrected. God's ways are perfect. They can never be

made better. So isn't it the most reasonable thing in the world to serve God and to do so without reservation, with all your heart?

4. *It is reasonable because God is worthy of our very best efforts.* We read in Revelation 4:11:

> *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power,*
> *for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.*

And again, of Jesus in Revelation 5:9-10:

> *You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,*
> *because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*
> *You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.*

And yet again in Revelation 5:12:

> *Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,*
> *to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!*

That is the testimony of the elders, the four living creatures, the angels, and the entire company of the redeemed. It means that God is worthy of all honor, including the very best we have to offer. Do you believe that?

I think that is the problem. If we did believe it, we would judge it reasonable to live for Jesus now and we would do it. Instead, in many cases we only say, "Jesus is worthy of all honor," and then go out and fail to live for him. Our actions refute our profession. On the other hand, if you do live for him, giving God all you can ever hope to be, then you are testifying that God truly is a great God and that he is worthy of the best you or anyone else can offer.

5. *It is reasonable because only spiritual things will last.* My last point is that it is reasonable to give everything you have for God because in the final analysis only that which is spiritual will last. Everything else—

everything we see and touch and handle—will pass away. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away" (Matt. 24:35). If that is true of the heavens and the earth, it is certainly true of the small perishable things you and I give so much of our lives for.

Although "the world and its desires pass away," we are also told that the one who "does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). And so do his works! The Bible says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.... They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them" (Rev. 14:13). Learning to think this way is part of what it means to think spiritually. It is a start in developing a truly Christian mind.

I close with two illustrations. Jim Elliot wrote as a young missionary, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." He gave his life to God in what he judged to be the most reasonable service, and he gained a spiritual inheritance forever.

Another missionary, William Borden, came from a wealthy privileged family, was a graduate of Yale University, and had the promise of a wonderful and lucrative career before him. But he felt a call to serve God as a missionary in China and left for the field even though his family and friends thought him a fool for going. After a short time away and even before he reached China, Borden contracted a fatal disease and died. He had given up everything to follow Jesus. He died possessing nothing in this world. But Borden of Yale did not regret it. We know this because he left a note as he lay dying that said, "No reserve, no retreat, and no regrets." Like so many others, he found the service of Christ to be eminently reasonable, and he gained a lasting reward.

Chapter 185.
The Pattern of This Age

Romans 12:2

Some verses in the Bible are enriched when we read them in several translations, and Romans 12:2 is one of them. In the New International Version the first part of Romans 12:2 says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world."

This verse has two key words: *world*, which in Greek is literally *age* (*aiôn*, meaning this present age, in contrast to "the age to come"), and *do not conform*, which is a compound having at its root the word *scheme*. So the verse means "Do not let the age in which you live force you into its scheme of thinking and behaving." This is what some of the translations try to bring out. The New American Catholic Bible says, "Do not conform yourselves to this age." The Jerusalem Bible says, "Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you." The Living Bible reads, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world." Best known of all is the paraphrase of J. B. Phillips, which states, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold."

The idea in each of these renderings is that the world has its ways of thinking and doing things and is exerting pressure on Christians to conform to them. But instead of being conformed, Christians are to be changed from within to be increasingly like Jesus Christ.

What Is Worldliness?

The first phrase of verse 2 is a warning against worldliness. But as soon as we say *worldly* we have to stop and make clear what real worldliness is. When I was growing up in a rather fundamentalist church I was taught that worldliness was following such "worldly" pursuits as smoking, drinking, dancing, and playing cards. A Christian girl would say:

> I don't smoke, and I don't chew,
> And I don't go with boys who do.

That is not what Romans 12:2 is about, however. To think of worldliness only in those terms is to trivialize what is a far more serious and far more subtle problem.

The clue to what is in view here is that in the next phrase Paul urges, as an alternative to being "conformed" to this world, being "transformed *by the renewing of your mind."* This means that he is concerned about a way of thinking rather than merely behaving, though right behavior will follow naturally if our thinking is set straight. In other words, the worldliness we are to break away from and repudiate is the world's "worldview," what the Germans call *Weltanschauung,* a systematic way of looking at all things. We are to break out of the world's way of thinking and instead let our minds be molded by the Word of God.

In our day Christians have not done this very well, and that is the reason why they are so often "worldly" in the other senses too. In fact, it is a sad commentary on our time, verified by surveys, that American Christians in general have mostly the same values and behavior patterns as the world around them.

Secularism: "The Cosmos Is All That Is"

If worldliness is not smoking, drinking, dancing, and playing cards, what is it? If it is a way of thinking, what is a worldly worldview? There is no single word that perfectly describes how the world thinks, but *secularism* is good for general purposes. It is an umbrella term that covers a number of other "isms," like humanism, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism, hedonism, and materialism. *Secularism,* more than any other single word, aptly describes the mental framework and value structure of the people of our time.

The word *secular* also comes closest to what Paul says when he refers to "the pattern of this world." *Secular* is derived from the Latin word *saeculum,* which means age. And the word found in Paul's phrase in verse 2 is the exact Greek equivalent. The NIV uses the word *world,* but the Greek actually says, "Do not be conformed to this *age."* In other words, "Do not be 'secularist' in your worldview."

There is a right way to be secular, of course. Christians live in the world and are therefore rightly concerned about the world's affairs. We have legitimate secular concerns. But secularism (note the "ism") is more

than this. It is a philosophy that does not look beyond this world but instead operates as if this age is all there is.

The best single statement of secularism I know is something Carl Sagan said in the television series *Cosmos.* He was pictured standing before a spectacular view of the heavens with its many swirling galaxies, saying in a hushed, almost reverential tone of voice, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." That is bold-faced secularism. It is bound up entirely by the limits of the material universe, by what we can see and touch and weigh and measure. If we think in terms of our existence here, it means operating within the limits of life on earth. If we are thinking of time, it means disregarding the eternal and thinking only of the now.

We have it expressed in popular advertising slogans like "You only go around once" and Pepsi's "Now Generation." These slogans dominate our culture and express an outlook that has become increasingly harmful. If now is the only thing that matters, why should we worry about the national debt, for example? That's not our problem. Let our children worry about it. Or why should we study hard preparing to do meaningful work later on in life, as long as we can have a good time now? Most important, why should I worry about God or righteousness or sin or judgment or salvation, if now is all that really matters?

R. C. Sproul writes, "For secularism, all life, every human value, every human activity must be understood in light of this present time.... What matters is *now* and only *now.* All access to the above and the beyond is *blocked.* There is no exit from the confines of this present world. The secular is all that we have. We must make our decisions, live our lives, make our plans, all within the closed arena of this time—the here and now."

Each of us should understand that description instantly, because it is the viewpoint we are surrounded with every single day of our lives and in every conceivable place and circumstance.

Yet that is the outlook to which we must refuse to be conformed. Instead of being conformed to this world, as if that is all there is, we are to see all things as relating to God and to eternity. Here is the contrast, as expressed by Harry Blamires: "To think secularly is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth; it is to keep one's calculations rooted in thisworldly criteria. To think Christianly is to accept all things with the mind as related, directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed and chosen child of God."

Humanism: "You Will Be Like God"

There is a proper kind of humanism, meaning a proper concern for human beings.
Humanitarianism is a better word for it. People who care for other people are humanitarians. But there is also a philosophical humanism, which is a way of looking at people, particularly ourselves, apart from God, and this is wrong and harmful. This is a secular way of looking at them, which is why we so often speak not just of humanism but of "secular humanism."

The best example of secular humanism I know is in the Book of Daniel. One day
Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, was on the roof of his palace looking out over his splendid hanging gardens to the prosperous city beyond. He was impressed with his handiwork and said, "Is this not the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30). It was a statement that everything he saw was "of him, "by" him, and "for" the glory of his majesty, which is humanism. Humanism says that everything revolves around man and exists for man's glory.

God would not tolerate this arrogance. So he judged Nebuchadnezzar with insanity, indicating that this is a crazy philosophy. Nebuchadnezzar was then driven out to live with the beasts and acted like a beast until at

last he acknowledged that God alone is the true ruler of the universe and that everything exists for his glory rather than ours.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

> *His dominion is an eternal dominion....*
> *He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth.*

Daniel 4:34-35

Humanism is opposed to God and hostile to Christianity. This has always been so, but it is especially evident in the public statements of modern humanism: *A Humanist Manifesto* (1933), *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), and *The Secularist Humanist Declaration* (1980). The first of these, the 1933 document, said, "Traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival."

The 1973 *Humanist Manifesto II* said, "We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural" and "There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body."

Humanism leads to a deification of self and, contrary to what it professes, to an utter disregard for other people.

In deifying self, humanism actually deifies nearly everything but God. Several years ago Herbert Schlossberg, one of the project directors for the Fieldstead Institute, wrote a book titled *Idols for Destruction,* in which he showed how humanism has made a god of history, mammon,

nature, power, religion, and, of course, humanity itself. It is brilliantly done.

As far as disregarding other people, well, look at the best-sellers of the 1970s. You will find titles like *Winning through Intimidation* and *Looking Out for Number One.* These books say, in a manner utterly consistent with secular humanism, "Forget about other people; look out for yourself; you are what matters." What emerged in those years is what Thomas Wolfe, the social critic, called the "Me Decade." And the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, which others have aptly called the "Golden Age of Greed."

Remember, too, that this is the philosophy (some would say religion) underlying public school education. This is ironic, of course, since humanism is an irrational philosophy. How so? Because it is impossible to establish humanistic or any other values or goals without a transcendent point of reference, and it is precisely that transcendent point that is being repudiated by the humanists. Frighteningly, the irrationalism of humanism is appearing in the chaos of the schools, where students are using guns to kill other students and threaten teachers.

In the fall of 1992 an ABC *Prime Time Live* television special, featuring Diane Sawyer, reported that in this country one in five students come to school with a handgun somewhat regularly and that there are ten times as many knives in schools as there are guns. This is as true of the suburbs as it is of the inner city. In Wichita, Kansas, which calls itself mid-America, students must pass through metal detectors in order to enter school, and there are still guns and other weapons in the buildings.

For humanism as well as for secularism, the word for Christians is "do not conform any longer." We remember that the first expression of humanism was not the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933 or even the arrogant words of Nebuchadnezzar spoken about six hundred years before Christ, but rather the words of Satan in the Garden of Eden, who told Eve, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).

Relativism: "A Moral Morass"

While we are talking about humanism we also have to talk briefly about *relativism,* because if man is the focal point of everything, then there are no absolutes in any area of life and everything is up for grabs. Some years ago Professor Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago wrote a book called *The Closing of the American Mind*, in which he said on the very first page, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."

What that book set out to prove is that education is impossible in such a climate. People can learn skills, of course. You can learn to drive a truck, work a computer, handle financial transactions, and do scores of other things. But real education, which means learning to sift through error to discover what is true, good, and beautiful, is impossible, because the goals of real education—truth, goodness, and beauty—do not exist. And even if they did exist in some far-off metaphysical never-never-land, it would be impossible to find them, because it requires absolutes even to discover absolutes. It requires such absolutes as the laws of logic, for example.

Is it any wonder that with such an underlying destructive philosophy as relativism, not to mention secularism and humanism, America is experiencing what *Time* magazine called "a moral morass" and "a values vacuum"?

Materialism: "The Material Girl"

The final "ism" to which Christians are not to be conformed is *materialism.* This takes us back to secularism, since it is a part of it. If "the cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be," as Carl Sagan says, then nothing exists but what is material or measurable, and if there is any value to be found in life, it must be in material terms. Be as healthy as you can. Live as long as you can. Get as rich as you can.

When today's young people are asked to name their heroes or heroines, what comes out rather quickly is that they have no people they actually look up to except possibly the rich and the famous—people like Michael Jordan and Madonna. And speaking of Madonna, isn't it interesting that she is referred to most often not as a singer or entertainer or even a sex symbol but as "the material girl." That is, she represents the material things of this world, clothes (or the lack of them), money, fame, and above all, pleasure. And this is what today's young people want to be like! They want to be rich and famous and have things and enjoy them. They want to be like Madonna.

The poet T. S. Eliot wrote an epitaph for our materialistic generation:

> Here were decent godless people:
> Their only monument the asphalt road
> And a thousand lost golf balls.

How different the Lord Jesus Christ! He was born into a poor family, was laid in a borrowed manger at his birth, never had a home or a bank account or a family of his own.

He said of himself, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20).

At his trial before Pilate he said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight... My kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36).

When he died he was laid in a borrowed tomb.

If there was ever an individual who operated on the basis of values above and beyond the world in which we live, it was Jesus Christ. He was the polar opposite of "the material girl." But at the same time no one has ever affected this world for good as much as Jesus. It is into his image that we are to be transformed rather than being forced into the mold of this world's sinful and destructive "isms."

No One But Jesus

In the next few studies we are going to explore another aspect of the problem presented by today's world and begin to look at the solution proposed in Romans 12:2. But I want to close this study by looking ahead one phrase to what Paul says we are to be: not *conformed* but *transformed* by the renewing of our minds. There is a deliberate distinction between those two words. Conformity is something that happens to you outwardly. Transformation happens inwardly. The Greek word translated *transformed* is *metamorphoô,* from which we get *metamorphosis.* It is what happens to the lowly caterpillar when it turns into a beautiful butterfly.

This Greek word is found four times in the New Testament: once here, once in 2 Corinthians 3:18 to describe our being transformed into the glorious likeness of Jesus Christ, and twice in the gospels of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain where he had gone with Peter, James, and John. Those verses say, "There he was transfigured before them" (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2). The same word used by Paul to describe our transformation by the renewing of our minds so that we will not be conformed to this world is used by the gospel writers to describe the transfiguration

of Jesus from the form of his earthly humiliation to the radiance that Peter, James, and John were privileged to witness for a time.

And that is why Paul writes as he does in 2 Corinthians, saying, "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

In 2 Corinthians Paul says, "It is happening." In Romans 12 he says, "Let it happen," thus putting the responsibility, though not the power to accomplish this necessary transformation, upon us. How does it happen? Through the renewing of our minds; and the way our minds become renewed is by study of the life-giving and renewing Word of God. Without that study we will remain in the world's mold, unable to think and therefore also unable to act as Christians. With that study, blessed and empowered as it will be by the Holy Spirit, we will begin to

take on something of the glorious luster of the Lord Jesus Christ and become increasingly like him.

Chapter 186.
This Mindless Age

Romans 12:2

In the last chapter I referred to Harry Blamires, an Englishman who wrote an important Christian book in 1963 titled *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* Blamires was a student of C. S. Lewis. His book's main thesis, repeated over and over in chapter 1, is that "There is no longer a Christian mind," meaning that in our time there is no longer a distinctly Christian way of thinking. There is to some extent a Christian ethic and even a somewhat Christian way of life and piety. But there is no distinctly Christian frame of reference, no uniquely Christian worldview, to guide our thinking in distinction from the thought of the secular world around us.

Unfortunately, the situation has not improved over the past thirty years. In fact, it has grown worse. Today, not only is there little or no genuine Christian thinking, there is very little thinking of any kind. The Western world (and perhaps even the world as a whole) is well on its way to becoming what I have frequently called a "mindless society."

Since Christians are called to mind renewal—our text says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed *by the renewing of your mind*"—this cultural mindlessness is a major aspect of the "pattern of this world" that we are to recognize, understand, repudiate, and overcome. We are to be many things as Christians, but we are especially to be thinking people. We are to possess a "Christian mind."

America Has Been "Vannatized"

There are a number of causes for our present mindlessness—Western materialism, the fast pace of modern life, and philosophical skepticism, to name a few—but I believe that the chief cause is television.

I began to study television as a cultural problem several years ago, and the thing that got me started was a 1987 graduation address at Duke University by Ted Koppel of ABC's *Nightline.* Following this address Koppel was frequently quoted by Christian communicators because of something he said about the Ten Commandments. He was deploring the declining moral tone of our country and reminded his predominantly secular audience of the abiding validity of this religious standard. He said that they are Ten Commandments, not "ten suggestions," and that they "are," not "were" the standard. But to me the most interesting thing about Koppel's address was his opening sentence, in which he said that America has been "Vannatized."

Koppel was referring to Vanna White, the beautiful and extraordinarily popular hostess of the television game show *Wheel of Fortune.* Vanna White is something of a phenomenon on television. Her actual work is simple. She stands on one side of a large game board that holds blocks representing the letters of words the contestants are supposed to guess. As they guess correctly, Vanna walks across the platform and turns the blocks around to reveal the letters. When she gets to the other side she claps her hands. It is simple work, but Vanna seems to like it. No, "like" is too mild a term, as Koppel notes. Vanna "thrills, rejoices, adores everything she sees." People respond to her so well that books about her have appeared in bookstores, and she is well up on that magical but elusive list of the most admired people in America.

But here is the interesting thing. Until recently Vanna never said a word on *Wheel of Fortune,* and Koppel asked how a person who says nothing and who is therefore basically unknown to us can be so popular. That is just the point, he answered. Since we do not know what Vanna White is actually like, she is whatever you want her to be. "Is she a feminist or every male chauvinist's dream? She is whatever you want her to be. Sister, lover, daughter, friend, never cross, nonthreatening, and

nonjudgmental to a fault." She is popular because we project our own deep feelings, needs, or fantasies onto the television image.

Koppel does not care very much about *Wheel of Fortune's* success, of course. He was analyzing our culture. And his point is that Vanna White's appeal is the very essence of television and that television forms our way of thinking or, to be more accurate, of not thinking. It has been hailed as the great teaching tool, but that is precisely what it does not do, because it seldom presents anything in enough depth for a person actually to think about it. Instead, it presents thirty-second flashes of events and offers images upon which we are invited to project our own vague feelings.

If all we are talking about is game shows and other forms of television entertainment, none of this would matter very much, except for the amount of time our children spend watching these banal, mind-numbing diversions rather than disciplining their minds by serious study. But if television is really conditioning us not to think, as Koppel and I maintain, then television is a serious intellectual, social, and spiritual problem.

Amusing Ourselves to Death

A more academic study of the negative impact of television on culture has been provided by Neil Postman, a professor of communication arts and sciences at New York University, in a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.

Amusing Ourselves to Death was published in 1985, one year after 1984, the year popularized as the title of George Orwell's futuristic novel, with its dark vision of a society controlled by fear. In Orwell's novel Big Brother rules everything with a ruthless iron fist. But Postman reminds us that there was another novel written slightly earlier with an equally chilling but quite different vision of the future: *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. In Huxley's novel there is no need for Big Brother, because in this ominous vision of the future people have

come to love their oppression as well as the technologies that strip away their capacities to think:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture.... As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited,* the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for diversions."

Obviously, as Postman suggests, the Western cultures have succumbed to the second of these two oppressions, just as the communist countries fell victim to the first.

The first half of Postman's book is a study of the difference between what he calls "the age of typography" and our present television age, which he calls "the age of show business."
Typography refers to words in print, and it concerns the communication of ideas by newspapers, pamphlets, and books. It is rational and analytic, because that is the way written words work. He writes:

To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning. It means to uncover lies, confusions, and over-generalizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another. To accomplish this, one must achieve a certain distance from the words themselves, which is, in fact, encouraged by the isolated and impersonal text. That is why a good reader does not cheer an apt sentence or pause to applaud even an

inspired paragraph. Analytic thought is too busy for that, and too detached.

He illustrates the strength of the age of typography by public attention to the famous LincolnDouglas debates of the mid-eighteen hundreds, which people were capable of hearing, understanding, and forming opinions about, even though they lasted three to seven hours. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "America was as dominated by the printed word and an oratory based on the printed word as any society we know of," Postman says. The country could think.

Unfortunately, television does not operate by rational means of communication but by images, as Ted Koppel pointed out, and as a result we are becoming a mindless culture.

News on Television: "Now... This"

A great deal of what Postman develops in his book is reinforcement for what I have been describing as mindlessness. So let me review three specific areas of bad influence, as he sees it.

A chapter in the book that deals with news on television is entitled "Now... This." That is because these are the words most used on television to link one brief televised news segment— the average news segment on network news programs is only forty-five seconds long—to the next news segment or commercial. What the phrase means is that what one has just seen has no relevance to what one is about to see or, for that matter, to anything. Rational thought requires such connections. It depends on similarities, contradictions, deductions, and the development of probable consequences. It requires time. It is what books and other serious print media give us. But this is precisely what television does not give. It does not give time for thought, and if it does not give time for thought or promote thought, what it essentially amounts to is "diversion."

Postman says that television gives us "news without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say, news as pure entertainment." In other words, it is not only mindless, it

is teaching us to be mindless, to the point at which we even suppose that our ignorance is great knowledge.

Reach Out and Elect Someone

A second area of bad influence is politics. Postman calls this chapter "Reach Out and Elect Someone." Ronald Reagan once said, "Politics is just like show business." But if this is so, then the object of politics on television is not to pursue excellence, clarity, or honesty, or any other generally recognized virtue, but to *appear as,* if you are pursuing these things.

After the 1968 presidential campaign, in which Richard Nixon finally won the White House, a political writer named Joe McGinniss wrote a book titled *The Selling of the President 1968.* In it he described the strategy of the Nixon advisors who felt that their candidate had lost the 1960 election to John Kennedy because of Kennedy's better television image. He reports William Gavin, one of Nixon's chief aids, as advising, "Break away from linear logic: present a barrage of impressions, of attitudes. Break off in mid-sentence and skip to something half a world away.... Reason pushes the viewer back, it assaults him, it demands that he agree or disagree; impression can envelop him, invite him in, without making an intellectual demand.... Get the voters to like the guy, and the battle's two-thirds won."

How do campaign managers get their candidates elected today? Not by discussing issues, because that is a sure way to get defeated—any position on any issue, unless it is utterly meaningless, is certain to offend somebody. The way to win elections is to present a pleasant television image and to keep the candidate out of trouble for as long as possible.

That is why Ronald Reagan won in 1980 and even more decisively in 1984. It was not his positions, though they were substantially different from those of his predecessors and were, in my opinion, generally right. There really was "a Reagan revolution." But this was not why he won. He won because he had a long career in movies and was a master of the

television medium. He projected an image of a strong decent man we could trust.

The 1988 presidential election, in which George Bush defeated Michael Dukakis, involved issues about which every intelligent voter should have been carefully informed. Television is supposed to be the medium through which this is done. But a discussion of the issues is precisely what the voters did not get. Where did George Bush and Michael Dukakis differ in their politics? In regard to domestic programs such as Social Security, child care, education, taxes, abortion? In international affairs? The military? Relations with Russia, Eastern Europe, China, Japan? It was only specialists in government who knew the true answers to those questions, not the voters, because those were not the issues of the campaign.

What were the issues then? Actually, there was only one issue, and it was this: Is George Bush a "wimp"? That question was raised because he looked like a wimp on television; he is thin, seems to be frail, and held his head slightly to one side in a way that looked deferential. If the Dukakis camp could encourage voters to think of Bush that way, they would vote for Dukakis, because no one wants a wimp for president. On the other hand, Bush's task was to convince the voters that he would actually be a strong president, and the strategy of his camp was therefore to wage a strong, aggressive—many said unfair and nasty—campaign against Dukakis.

The media complained! Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings were predictably selfrighteous and offended. They called it the least substantial, meanest campaign in memory. But how hypocritical! It was mindless, but it was mindless precisely because that is what television demands. It demands images and not thought.

The campaign of 1992 is another example. I said from the beginning that Bill Clinton would win the election, not because he might have a better program for getting this country out of debt or even because the electorate was unhappy with America's slow rate of economic growth in

the previous two years, but because Clinton looks better on television. Clinton is the perfect television candidate, and so he won.

Marshall McLuhan, the television "guru," was right when he said, "The medium *is* the message." The campaign managers have learned that, which is why they organize the kinds of campaigns they do.

I know someone will say, "But Reagan *was* a decent, strong man." Or, "George Bush really *is* a wimp (or 'is *not* a wimp')." Or, "Bill Clinton is the stronger candidate." But my point is that we do not actually know those things and cannot know them, at least from television, until events perhaps support or fail to support our perceptions. The most serious thing of all perhaps is not that we do not know, but that we think we do know because of television.

Religion as Entertainment

The third area of bad influence is religion. Postman's chapter on religion is called "Shuffle Off to Bethlehem." Religion is on television chiefly in an entertainment format. With the possible exception of Billy Graham, who has an international following quite apart from the television medium, and some other teaching pastors such as Charles Stanley and D. James Kennedy, the religious television stars are mostly entertainers. Pat Robertson is a master of ceremonies along the lines of Merv Griffin. Jimmy Swaggart is a piano player and singer as well as having been a vivacious and entertaining speaker. Even televised church services, like those of Jerry Falwell and Robert Schuller, contain their requisite musical numbers and pop testimonies, just like variety shows on secular television. The proper name for them is vaudeville.

Nearly everything that makes religion real is lost in the translation of church to television. The chief loss is a sense of the transcendent. God is missing. Postman says:

Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no

theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana....

CBS knows that Walter Cronkite plays better on television than the Milky Way. And Jimmy Swaggart plays better than God. For God exists only in our minds, whereas Swaggart is *there,* to be seen, admired, adored. Which is why he is the star of the show.... If I am not mistaken, the word for this is blasphemy.

An observer who likes such religious entertainment might object, "Well, what harm is done as long as genuine religion is still to be found in church on Sundays?" I would argue that so pervasive and normalizing is the impact of television that pressures have inevitably come to make church services as irrelevant and entertaining as the tube.

In the vast majority of church services today there are virtually no pastoral prayers, while there is much brainless music, chummy chatter, and abbreviated sermons. Preachers are told to be personable, to relate funny stories, to smile, and above all to stay away from topics that might cause people to become unhappy with the church and leave it. They are to preach to felt needs, not necessarily real needs. This generally means telling people only what they want to hear.

Your Mind Matters

This is the point at which we need to talk about genuine mind renewal for Christians, which is what I will continue with in the next study. But I close here by mentioning a helpful little book by John Stott, the Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church in London, titled *Your Mind Matters.* It deals with six spheres of Christian living, and it argues that each one is impossible without a proper and energetic use of our minds: Christian worship, Christian faith, Christian holiness, Christian guidance, Christian evangelism, and Christian ministry. We need to think.

Stott argues that "anti-intellectualism... is... part of the fashion of the world and therefore a form of worldliness. To denigrate the mind is to undermine foundational Christian doctrines." He asks pointedly, "Has

God created us rational beings, and shall we deny our humanity which he has given us? Has God spoken to us, and shall we not listen to his words? Has God renewed our mind through Christ, and shall we not think with it? Is God going to judge us by his Word, and shall we not be wise and build our house upon this rock?" They are important and helpful questions, if you *think* about them.

Chapter 187.
Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age: Part 1

Romans 12:2

In each of the last two studies dealing with what it means to think as a Christian rather than in a worldly or secular way, I have mentioned Harry Blamires, an Englishman who has written two good books on this subject: *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (1963) and *Recovering the Christian Mind: Meeting the Challenge of Secularism* (1988). In each of these books Blamires encourages us to reject the world's thinking and begin to think as Christians. This is what Paul is writing about in our text from Romans 12: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (v. 2). This means that our thinking is not to be determined by the culture of the world around us but rather that we are to have a distinctly different and growing Christian worldview.

But what does it actually mean to have an outlook like that? How are we to experience mind renewal in our exceedingly mindless age?

Thinking Christianly and Thinking Secularly

The one thing this does not mean is what most people probably assume it does, and that is to start thinking mainly about Christian things. We do need to think about Christian subjects, of course. In fact, it is from that base of revealed doctrine and its applications to life that we can begin to think Christianly about other matters. I am going to pursue exactly that line of thought in this study. But to think Christianity itself

is not a matter of thinking about Christian subjects as opposed to thinking about secular subjects, as we suppose, but rather to think in a Christian way about everything. It means to have a Christian mind.

This is because, by contrast, it is possible to think in a secular way even about religious things. Take the Lord's Supper, for instance. For most Christians the Lord's Supper is probably the most spiritual of all spiritual matters, and yet it is possible to think about even it in a worldly manner. For example, a trustee of the church might be thinking that he forgot to include the cost of the communion elements in the next year's budget. Another person might be looking at the minister and criticizing his way of handling the elements. "He's so awkward," this person might be thinking. Still another person might be reflecting on how good it is for people to have spiritual thoughts or to observe religious ceremonies. "This is good for people," he might be reflecting. Each of these persons is thinking secularly about the most sacred of Christian practices.

On the other hand, it is possible to think Christianly about even the most mundane matters. Blamires suggests how we might do this at a gasoline station while we are waiting for our tank to be filled with gas. We might be reflecting on how a mechanized world with cars and other machines tends to make God seem unnecessary for people, or how a speeded-up world in which we use our cars to race from one appointment to another makes it difficult to think deeply about or even care for other people. Even further, we might be wondering, do material things like cars serve us, or are we enslaved to them? Do they cause us to covet and therefore break the tenth commandment? How do they impact the environment over which God has made us stewards?

Blamires says, "There is nothing in our experience, however trivial, worldly, or even evil, which cannot be thought about Christianly. There is likewise nothing in our experience, however sacred, which cannot be thought about secularly—considered, that is to say, simply in its relationship to the passing existence of bodies and psyches in a time-locked universe."

The God Who Is There

So I ask again, Where do we start? How do we begin to think and act as Christians? There is a sense in which we could begin at any point, since truth is a whole and truth in any area will inevitably lead to truth in every other area. But if the dominant philosophy of our day is secularism, which means viewing all of life only in terms of the visible world and in terms of the here and now, then the best of all possible starting places is the doctrine of God, for God alone is above and beyond the world and is eternal. Even more, the doctrine of God is a necessary and inevitable starting place if we are to produce a genuinely Christian response to secularism.

What does that mean for our thinking?

Well, if there is a God, that very fact means that there is literally such a thing as the supernatural. *Supernatural* means over, above, or in addition to nature. In other words, to go back to Carl
Sagan's popular credo, the cosmos is *not* all there is or was or ever will be. God is. God exists. He is there, whether we acknowledge it or not, and he stands behind the cosmos. In fact, it is only because there is a God that there is a cosmos, since without God nothing else could possibly have come to be.

If anything exists, there must be an inevitable, self-existent, uncaused first cause that stands behind it.

Several years ago at the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology Professor John H. Gerstner was talking about creation and referred to something his high school physics teacher once said: "The most profound question that has ever been asked by anybody is: Why is there something rather than nothing?"

Gerstner said that he was quite impressed with that at the time. But later, as he sharpened his ability to think, he recognized that it was not a profound question at all. In fact, it was not even a true question. It posed an alternative, something rather than nothing. "But what is

nothing?" Gerstner asked. "Nothing" eludes definition. It even defies conception. For as soon as you say,
"Nothing is..." nothing ceases to be nothing and becomes something. Gerstner referred to Jonathan Edwards, who is not noted for being funny but who was at least a slight bit humorous on one occasion when he said, "Nothing is what the sleeping rocks dream of."

So, said Gerstner, "Anyone who thinks he knows what nothing is must have those rocks in his head."

As soon as you ask, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" the alternative vanishes, you are left with something, and the only possible explanation for that something is "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), which is what Christianity teaches.

"He Is There and He Is Not Silent"

The God who exists has revealed himself. This is the doctrine of revelation. Francis Schaeffer titled one of his books *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* to make this point. God is there, and he has not kept himself hidden from us. He has revealed himself—in nature, in history, and especially in the Scriptures.

In chapter 1851 mentioned four "ism"s that are part of the pattern of this age: secularism, humanism, relativism, and materialism. The doctrine of God is the specific Christian answer to secularism. Revelation is the specific answer to relativism. If God has spoken, then what he has said is truthful and can be trusted absolutely, since God is truthful. This gives us absolutes in an otherwise relative and therefore ultimately chaotic universe.

That God has spoken and that God's Word to us can be trusted has always been the conviction of the church, at least until relatively modern times. Today the truthfulness of the Bible has been challenged, but with disastrous results. For without a sure word from God all words are equally valid, and Christianity is neither more certain nor more compelling than any other merely human word or philosophy.

But notice this: If God has spoken, there will always be a certain hardness about the Christian faith and Christians. I do not mean that we will be hard on others or insensitive to them. Rather, there will be a certain unyielding quality to our convictions.

For one thing, we will insist upon truth and will not bow to the notion, however strongly it is pressed upon us, that "that's just your opinion."

Several years ago when I was flying to Chicago from the West Coast I got into a conversation with the woman seated next to me. We talked about religion, and whenever I made a statement about the gospel she replied, "But that's just your opinion." She was out of the relativistic mold.

I hit upon a way of answering her that preserved the hardness of what I was trying to say and yet did it nicely. I said, "You're right; that is my opinion, but that's not really what matters. What matters is: Is it true?"

She did not know quite what to say to that. So the conversation went on, and after a while she replied to something else I was saying in the same way: "But that's just your opinion."

I said, "You're right; that is my opinion, but that's not really what matters. What matters is: Is it true?" This happened about a dozen times, and after a while she began to smile and then laugh as she anticipated my comment coming. When I got home I sent her a copy of *Mere Christianity.*

Another thing the doctrine of revelation will mean for us is that we will not back down or compromise on moral issues. You know how it is whenever you speak out against some particularly bad act. If people do not say, "But that's just your opinion," they are likely to attack you personally, saying things like, "You'd do the same thing if you were in her situation" or "Do you think you're better than he is?" We must not be put off by such attacks. Our response should be something like this: "Please, I wasn't talking about what I would do if I were in her shoes. I'm a sinner too. I might have acted much worse. I would probably have failed sooner. I wasn't talking about that. I was talking about what is

right, and I think that is what we need to talk about. None of us is ever going to do better than we are doing unless we talk about it and decide what's right to do."

"What the secular mind is ill-equipped to grasp is that the Christian faith leaves Christians with no choice at all on many matters of this kind," writes Blamires. We are people under God's authority, and that authority is expressed for us in the Bible.

The West's Spiritual Exhaustion

Now let's return to some implications of the doctrine of God. First, if there is a God and if he has made us to have eternal fellowship with him, then we are going to look at failure, suffering, pain, and even death differently than non-Christians do. For the Christian these can never be the greatest of all tragedies. They are bad. Death is an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). But they are overbalanced by eternal matters.

Second, success and pleasure will not be the greatest of all goods for us. They are good, but they will never compare with salvation from sin or knowing God. Jesus said it clearly: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). Or, from the other side, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but who cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

That leads to a Christian response to materialism. There are two kinds of materialism, a philosophical materialism like that of doctrinaire communism and a practical materialism that is most characteristic of the West. We have been raised with a false kind of syllogism that says that because we are not communists and communists are materialists, therefore we are not materialists. But that is not necessarily true. Most of us embrace a practical materialism that warps our souls, stunts our spiritual growth, and hinders the advance of the gospel in our time.

The best critique of Western materialism that I know was presented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the well-known Soviet dissident and writer, in

an address given to the graduating class of Harvard University in 1978. Up to that point Solzhenitsyn had been somewhat of an American hero. He had suffered in the Soviet Union's infamous gulag prison system and had later defected. That's why he was invited to speak at Harvard. But in this address he was so blunt in his criticism of the West that his popularity vanished almost overnight, and he was almost never heard from, though he continued to write voluminously from a retreat in New England.

Solzhenitsyn's address was no defense of socialism. Quite the contrary. He celebrated its ideological defeat in Eastern Europe, saying, "It is zero and less than zero." But he declared, "Should someone ask me whether I would indicate the West such as it is today as a model to my country, frankly I would have to answer negatively.... Through intense suffering our own country has now achieved a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive." He maintained that "after the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor and by intolerable music."

According to Solzhenitsyn, the West has pursued physical well-being and the acquiring of material goods to the exclusion of almost everything spiritual.

"We Do Not Mind That We Die"

In 1989 Westerners were astounded by the political changes in Eastern Europe. Country after country repudiated its seventy-two-year communist heritage and replaced its leaders with democratically elected officials. We rejoiced in these changes, and rightly so. But we need to remember two things.

First, while the former communist lands have moved in a more democratic direction, we have moved in the direction of their materialism, living as if the only thing that matters is how many earthly

goods we can acquire now. We marveled at the moving scenes of East Germans passing through the openings in the infamous Berlin Wall. We saw them gazing in amazement at the abundance of goods on West Berlin shelves. But what is the good of their being able to come to the West if all they discover here is a spiritual climate vastly inferior to their own?

And that is the second thing we need to remember. Though the American media with its blindness to things spiritual did not acknowledge it, the changes in the Eastern Bloc came about not by anyone's will, that of Mikhail Gorbachev or any other, but by the spiritual vitality of the people.

The strength of the Polish Solidarity movement, where the breakthrough first came, is that of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II was a strong supporter of the people's faith and dreams.

Faith and spiritual strength also lay behind the changes in East Germany. Conventional wisdom in Germany has it that the turning point was on October 9, 1989, when seventy thousand demonstrators marched in Leipzig. The army was placed on full alert, and under normal circumstances it would have attacked the demonstrators violently. But the protesters' rallying cry was, "Let them shoot, we will still march." The army did not attack, and after that the protests grew until the government was overthrown.

In Romania, where President Nicolae Ceauşescu just weeks before had declared that apple trees would bear pears before socialism should be endangered in Romania, the end began in the house of a Protestant pastor whose parishioners surrounded him, declaring that they were willing to die rather than let him be arrested by the state police.

Josef Tson, founder and president of the Romanian Missionary Society, was in Romania just after the death of Ceauşescu and reported the details of the story. The pastor was from the city of Timisoara, and his name was Laszlo Tokes. On Saturday, December 16, 1989, just a few days before Christmas, hundreds and then thousands of people joined

the courageous parishioners who had surrounded his house trying to defend him. One was a twenty-four-year-old Baptist church worker who decided to distribute candles to the ever-growing multitude. He lit his candle, and then the others lit theirs. This transformed the protective strategy into a contagious demonstration, and it was the beginning of the revolution. The next day, when the secret police opened fire on the people, the young man was shot in the leg, and the doctors had to amputate it. But on his hospital bed this young man told his pastor, "I lost a leg, but I am happy. I lit the first light."

The people in Romania do not call the events of December 1989 a national revolution. They say rather, "Call it God's miracle." The rallying cry of the masses was "God lives!" That from a former fiercely atheistic country! The people shouted, "Freedom! Freedom! We do not mind that we die!"

Willing to die? Ah, that is the only ultimately valid test of whether one is a practical materialist at heart or whether one believes in something greater and more important than things. Do we? No doubt there are Westerners who are willing to die for things intangible. The people who were willing to die for civil rights during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s are examples. But today the masses of individuals in America no longer share this high standard of commitment and sacrifice. In 1978, during President Jimmy Carter's abortive attempt to reinstate draft registration for the young, newspapers carried a photograph of a Princeton University student defiantly waving a poster marked with the words: "Nothing is worth dying for."

"But if nothing is worth dying for, is anything worth living for?" asks Charles Colson, who comments on this photograph in *Against the Night: Living in the*

New Dark Ages. If there is nothing worth living for or dying for, then the chief end of man might as well be cruising the malls, which is the number one activity of today's teenagers, according to the pollsters.

Solzhenitsyn summarizes our weak thinking at this point when he says of today's Americans: "Every citizen has been granted the desired freedom and material goods in such quantity and of such quality as to guarantee in theory the achievement of happiness, in the morally inferior sense which has come into being during [these last] decades.... So who should now renounce all this? Why and for what should one risk one's precious life in defense of common values?"

Christianity has the answer to that, and Christians in past ages have known it. It is to "gain a better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35), which means to do what is right because what is right pleases God and that is what ultimately matters. But those who do it must be thinking Christians.

Chapter 188.
Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age: Part 2

Romans 12:2

In the last study I introduced the Christian doctrines of God and revelation as the biblical answer to secularism, humanism, relativism, and materialism, but I did not write about humanism in detail. The answer to humanism is the Christian doctrine of man.

Humanism is the philosophy to which human beings inevitably come if they are secularists. Secularism means eliminating God or anything else that may be transcendent from the universe and focusing instead on only what we can see and measure now. When God is eliminated in this process, man himself is left as the pinnacle of creation and becomes the inadequate and unworthy core for everything. In philosophy we usually trace the beginnings of this outlook to the preSocratic Greek philosopher Protagoras. Protagoras expressed his viewpoint in Greek words that have given us the better known Latin concept *homo mensura*, which means "Man, the measure" or, as it is often expressed, "Man is the measure of all things." The idea is that man is the norm by which everything is to be evaluated. He is the ultimate creature and thus the ultimate authority.

This seems to elevate man, but in practice it does exactly the opposite. It deifies man, but this deification always debases man in the end, turning him into an animal or even less than an animal. Moreover, it causes him to manipulate, ignore, disparage, wound, hate, abuse, and even murder other people.

What's Wrong with *Me?*

In the last twenty years something terrible has happened to Americans in the way we relate to other people, and it is due to the twisted humanism about which I have been writing. Prior to that time there was still something of a Christian ethos in this country and people used to care about and help other people. It was the natural thing to do. Today we focus on ourselves and deal with others only for what we can get out of them. This approach is materialistic and utilitarian.

In 1981 a sociologist-pollster, Daniel Yankelovich, published a study of the 1970s titled *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down.* This book documented a tidal shift in values by which many and eventually most Americans began to seek personal selffulfillment as the ultimate goal in life rather than operating on the principle that we are here to serve and even sacrifice for others, as Americans for the most part really had done previously. He found that by the late 1970s, 72 percent of Americans spent much time thinking about themselves and their inner lives. So pervasive was this change that as early as 1976 Tom Wolfe called the seventies the "Me Decade" and compared it to a third religious awakening.

But isn't this a good thing? Shouldn't thinking about ourselves make us happy? If we redirect our energy to fulfilling ourselves and earn as much as we can to indulge even our tiniest desires, shouldn't we be satisfied with life? No! It doesn't work that way. It fails on the personal level, and it fails in the area of our relationships with other people also.

In 1978 Margaret Halsey wrote an article for *Newsweek* magazine titled "What's Wrong with Me, Me, Me?" Halsey referred to Wolfe's description of the seventies as the "me" generation, highlighting the

belief that "inside every human being, however unprepossessing, there is a glorious, talented and overwhelmingly attractive personality [which] will be revealed in all its splendor if the individual just forgets about courtesy, cooperativeness and consideration for others and proceeds to do exactly what he or she feels like doing."

The problem, as Halsey pointed out, is not that there are not attractive characteristics in everyone (or at least in most people) but that human nature consists even more basically of "a mess of unruly primitive elements" which spoil the "self-discovery." These unruly elements need to be overcome, not indulged. And this means that the attractive personalities we seek really are not there to be discovered but rather are natures that need to be developed through choices, hard work, and lasting commitments to others. When we ask "What's wrong with me?" it is the "me, me, me" that is the problem.

This affects our relationships with other people too, because it makes our world impersonal. Charles Reich in his best-selling book *The Greening of America* wrote:

Modern living has obliterated place, locality and neighborhood, and given us the anonymous separateness of our existence. The family, the most basic social system, has been ruthlessly stripped to its functional essentials. Friendship has been coated over with a layer of impenetrable artificiality as men strive to live roles designed for them. Protocol, competition, hostility, and fear have replaced the warmth of the circle of affection which might sustain man against a hostile environment.... America [has become] one vast, terrifying anti-community.

The Christian Doctrine of Man

The Christian answer to this is the biblical doctrine of man, which means that if we are to have renewed minds in this area, we need to stop thinking about ourselves and other people as the world does and instead begin operating within a biblical framework.

When we turn to the Bible to see what it has to say about human beings, we find two surprising things. First, we find that man is a uniquely valuable being, far more important than the humanists imagine him to be. But, second, in his fallen condition we also find that he is much worse than the humanists suppose.

Let's take the fact that human beings are more valuable than humanists imagine first. The Bible teaches this at the very beginning of Genesis when it reports God as saying, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). We are then told, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (v. 27).

In ancient times books were copied by hand with rough letters. There was no typesetting, so it was not possible to emphasize one idea over another by such devices as italics, capital letters, boldface, and centered headings. Instead emphasis was made by repetition. For example, when Jesus wanted to stress something as unusually important, he began with the words "verily, verily" or "truly, truly." We have the same thing in the first chapter of Genesis with the phrases "in our image," "in his own image," and "in the image of God." That idea is repeated three times, which is a way of saying that man being created in God's image is important. It is what makes man distinct from the animals. He is to value this distinction greatly.

Just a few chapters later in Genesis, the fact that man is made in God's image is given as the reason why we are not to murder other people and why murderers should be punished by death, since they devalue another individual's life, taking it lightly: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Gen. 9:6).

Bible students have debated the full meaning of what it means to be made in the image of God for centuries. This is not surprising since being made in God's image means to be like God and God is above and far beyond us, beyond even our full understanding. Nevertheless, we can know a few things:

1. *Personality.* To be made in God's image means to possess the attributes of personality, as God himself does, but animals, plants, and matter do not. This involves knowledge, memory, feelings, and a will. Of course, there is a sense in which animals have what we call personalities, meaning that individuals in a species sometimes behave differently than others in the species. But animals do not create. They do not love or worship. Personality, in the sense I am writing about here, is something that links human beings to God but does not link either God or man to the rest of creation.

2. *Morality.* The second characteristic of being made in the image of God is morality, for God is a moral God and those made in his image are made with the capacity to discern between what is right and wrong, between good and evil. This involves the further elements of freedom and responsibility. To be sure, the freedom of human beings is not absolute, as God's freedom is. We are not free to do all things. We are limited. Nevertheless, our freedom is a true freedom, even when we use it wrongly as Adam and Eve did when they sinned. They lost their original righteousness as a result. But they were still free to sin, and they were free in their sinful state afterward in the sense that they were still able to make right and wrong choices. Moreover, they continued to be responsible for them.

3. *Spirituality.* The third feature of being made in the image of God is spirituality, which means that human beings are able to have fellowship with God. Another way of saying this is to say that "God is spirit" (John 4:24) and that we are also spirits meant for eternal fellowship with him. Nothing can be greater than that for human beings, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism states it well when it says in the answer to the first question: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

Perhaps at this point we are beginning to see why secular humanism is so bad and not just a less attractive option than Christianity. Humanism sounds like it is focusing on man and elevating man, but it actually strips away the most valuable parts of human nature. As far as

personality goes, it reduces us to mere animal urges, as Sigmund Freud tried to do. Regarding morality, instead of remaining responsible moral agents, which is our glory, we are turned into mere products of our environment or our genetic makeup, as B. F. Skinner asserts. As far as spirituality is concerned, how can we maintain a relationship to God if there is no God and we are made the measure of all things?

To refer again to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in humanism "things higher, warmer, and purer" are drowned out by "today's mass living habits and TV stupor." We can make engrossing fiveminute TV videos or commercials, but we no longer build cathedrals.

The Doctrine of the Fall

What is the problem, then? If human beings are more important and more valuable than the humanists imagine, why is it that things are so bad? The answer is the Christian doctrine of sin, which tells us that although people are more valuable than secularists imagine, they are in worse trouble than the humanists can admit. We have been made in God's image, but we have lost that image, which means that we are no longer fully human or as human as God intends us to be. We are fallen creatures.

Here I think of something I wrote about in the first volume of these studies, when I was looking closely at Romans 1. Romans 1 is about human beings falling down a steep slippery slope when they abandon God, and I pointed out that the conceptual framework for this downbound slide is found in Psalm 8. Psalm 8 both begins and ends with the words: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth" (vv. 1, 9). In the middle it talks about the created order. So the beginning and ending teach that everything begins and ends with God, rather than with man, and that if we think clearly we will agree with this.

Then it describes men and women particularly:

> *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,*

the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.
You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field.

Psalm 8:3-7

These verses fix man at a very interesting place in the created order: lower than the angels ("the heavenly beings") but higher than the animals—somewhere in between. This is what Thomas Aquinas saw when he described man as a mediating being. He is like the angels in that he has a soul. He is like the beasts in that he has a body. The angels have souls but not bodies, while the animals have bodies but not souls.

But here is the point. Although man is a mediating being, created to be somewhere between the angels and the animals, in Psalm 8 he is nevertheless described as being somewhat lower than the angels rather than as being somewhat higher than the beasts, which means that he is destined to look not downward to the beasts, but upward to the angels and beyond them to God and so to become increasingly like him. But if we will not look up, if we reject God, as secularism does, then we will inevitably look downward and so become increasingly like the lower creatures and behave like them. We will become beastlike, which is exactly what is happening in our society. People are acting like animals, and even worse.

Over the last few decades I have noticed that our culture is tending to justify bad human behavior on the ground that we are, after all, just animals. I saw an article in a scientific journal about a certain kind of duck. Two scientists had been observing a family of these ducks, and they reported something in this duck family that they called "gang rape." I am sure they did not want to excuse this crime among humans by the comparison they were making, but they were suggesting that gang rape among humans is at least understandable given our animal

ancestry. The inference comes from the evolutionary, naturalistic worldview they espoused.

A story of a similar nature appeared in the September 6, 1982, issue of *Newsweek* magazine. It was accompanied by a picture of an adult baboon holding a dead infant baboon, and over this there was a headline that read: "Biologists Say Infanticide Is as Normal as the Sex Drive—And That Most Animals, Including Man, Practice It." The title is as revealing in its way as Carl Sagan's "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." It identifies man as an animal, and it justifies his behavior on the basis of that identification. The sequence of thought goes like this: (1) Man is an animal, (2) Animals kill their offspring, (3) Therefore, it is all right (or at least understandable) that human beings kill their offspring.

The argument is fallacious, of course. Most animals do not kill their offspring. They protect their young and care for them. But even if in a few instances some animals do kill their offspring, this is still not comparable to the crimes of which human beings are capable. In the United States alone we kill over one and a half million babies each year by abortion—usually just for the convenience of the mother. And the number of outright murders is soaring.

The Doctrine of Redemption

My point in these last two studies has been that renewing our minds begins with understanding and applying the great Christian doctrines, and thus far we have at least touched on four of them: the doctrines of God, revelation, man, and the fall. This is a proper starting place for our thinking if we are serious about what Paul is urging upon us in our text from Romans, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

In the next study I will move on to the final phrase of verse 2 to ponder what it means to "test and approve what God's will is." But before I do that I want to mention the doctrine of redemption, without which nothing in either of these last two studies would be complete.

The doctrine of redemption—the fact that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)—infinitely intensifies everything I have been saying about man being both more valuable than the humanists can imagine as well as also being worse than they can possibly suppose.

The doctrine of redemption intensifies man's value because it teaches that even in his fallen state, a condition in which he hates God and kills his fellow creatures, man is still so valuable to God that God planned for and carried out the death of his own precious Son to save him. At the same time, this doctrine teaches that man's state is indescribably dreadful, because it took nothing less than the death of the very Son of God to accomplish it.

I want to close this study by referring again to what I regard as the greatest single piece of writing produced by the great Christian scholar and apologist C. S. Lewis. It was preached as a sermon in the summer of 1941, but it is known to us as an essay called "The Weight of Glory." Lewis begins by probing for the meaning of glory, recognizing that it is something of the very essence of God that we desire. It is something "no natural happiness will satisfy." At the same time it is also something from which we, in our sinful state, have been shut out. We want it. We sense that we are destined for it. But glory is beyond us—apart from what God has done to save us and make us like himself.

At the end of the essay, Lewis applies this to how we should learn to think about other people. We should understand that they are either going to be brought into glory, which is a supreme and indescribable blessing, or else they are going to be shut out from it—forever. Here he says, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as

the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors." What Lewis is doing in that essay is helping us to develop a Christian mind about other people, and his bottom line is that we will treat others better only if we learn to think of them in these terms.

Chapter 189.
God's Good, Pleasing, and Perfect Will

Romans 12:2

Some time ago the staff of the Bible Study Hour prepared a brochure that compared the world's thinking and the Bible's teaching in six important areas: God, man, the Bible, money, sex, and success. The differences were striking, but what impressed me most as I read over the brochure was how right many of the world's ideas seemed if not considered critically and biblically. We hear the world's approach given out so often, so attractively, and so persuasively, especially on television, that it's imperative that we think critically about it.

Here are some of the world's statements we printed:

"I matter most, and the world exists to serve me. Whatever satisfies me is what's important."

"If I earn enough money, I'll be happy. I need money to provide security for me and my family.
Financial security will protect me from hardship."

"Anything is acceptable as long as it doesn't hurt another person."

"Success is the path to fame, wealth, pleasure, and power. Look out for number one."

How about the Christian way? From the world's perspective the Christian way does not look attractive or even right. It says such things as:

"God is in control of all things and has a purpose for everything that happens."

"Man exists to glorify God."

"Money cannot shield us against heartbreak, failure, sin, disease, or disaster."

"Success in God's kingdom means humility and service to others."

Because we are so much part of the world and so little like Jesus Christ, even Christians find God's way unappealing. Nevertheless, we are to press on in that way and prove by our lives that the will of God really is good, pleasing, and perfect in all things.

I find it significant that this is where Paul's statements about being transformed by the renewing of our minds—rather than being conformed to the patterns of this world—end. They end with proving the way of God to be the best way and the will of God to be perfect. This means that action is needed: God is not producing hothouse or ivory-tower Christians. He is forming people who will prove the value of God's way by conscious choices and deliberate obedience.

This point was expressed well by Robert Candlish, one of the best Scottish exegetes of the last century. He wrote, "The believer's transformation by the renewing of his mind is not the ultimate end which the Holy Spirit seeks in his regenerating and renovating work. It is the immediate and primary design of that work, in one sense. We are created anew in Christ Jesus. That new creation is what the Holy Spirit first aims at and effects. But 'we are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them' (Eph. 2:10). The essence of a good work is the doing of the will of God. The proving of the will of God, therefore, is a fitting sequel of our 'being transformed by the renewing of our mind.' "

God Has a Will for Each of Us

This last part of Romans 12:1-2 is not difficult to handle because the points are obvious. The first is this: God has a good, pleasing, and

perfect will for each of us. Otherwise, how would it be possible for us to test and approve what that will is?

But this requires some explanation. Today when Christians talk about discovering the will of God what they usually have in mind is praying until God somehow discloses a specific direction for their lives—who they should marry, what job they should take, whether they should be missionaries, what house they should buy, and so forth. This is not exactly what proving the will of God means, nor is it what Romans 12:2 is teaching. The will of God is far more important than that.

You may recall that I discussed the matter of knowing the will of God earlier in this series, when I was writing on Romans 8:27, the verse that speaks about the Holy Spirit interceding "for the saints in accordance with God's will." I pointed out that Garry Friesen, a professor at Multnomah School of the Bible, and J. Robin Maxson, a pastor from Klamath, Oregon, had written a very good book on that subject entitled *Decision Making and the Will of God*. They distinguished between three meanings of the word *will:* first, God's *sovereign will,* which is hidden and is not revealed to us except as it unfolds in history; second, God's *moral will,* which is revealed in Scripture; and third, God's *specific will for individuals,* which is what people are usually thinking about when they speak of searching for or finding God's will. These authors rightly accepted the first two of these *wills,* but they disagreed with the idea that God has a specific will for each life and that it is the duty of the individual believer to find that will or "live in the center of it."

My evaluation of this book was that it is helpful in cutting away many of the hang-ups that have nearly incapacitated some Christians. Its exposure of the weakness of subjective methods of determining guidance is astute. Its stress on the sufficiency of Scripture in all moral matters is essential. My only reservation was that it does not acknowledge that God does indeed have a specific (though usually hidden) will for us or adequately recognize that God does sometimes reveal that will in special situations.

We may not know what that specific will is, and we do not need to be under pressure to "discover" it, fearing that if we miss it, somehow we will be doomed to a life outside the center of God's will. We are free to make decisions with what light and wisdom we possess.

Nevertheless, we can know that God does have a perfect will for us, that the Holy Spirit is praying for us in accordance with that will, and that this will of God for us will be done— because God has decreed it and because the Holy Spirit is praying for us in this area.

Still, having said all this, I need to add that this is not primarily what Romans 12:2 is talking about when it speaks of God's will. In this verse *will* is to be interpreted in its context, and the context indicates that the will of God that we are encouraged to follow is the general will of offering our bodies to God as living sacrifices, refusing to be conformed to the world's ways, and instead being transformed from within by the renewing of our minds. It is this that we are to pursue and thus find to be good, pleasing, and perfect, though, of course, if we do it, we will also find ourselves working out the details of God's specific will for our lives.

Good, Pleasing, and Perfect

The second obvious point about the ending of Romans 12:2 is that the will of God is good, pleasing, and perfect. It teaches about the nature of God's will for us.

1. *The will of God is good.* In a general way the will of God for every Christian is revealed in the Bible. Romans 8 contains a broad expression of this plan: that we might be delivered from God's judgment upon us for our sin and instead be made increasingly like Jesus Christ. The five specifically highlighted steps of this plan, as presented in verses 29-30, include (1) foreknowledge, (2) predestination, (3) effectual calling, (4) justification, and (5) glorification.

But there are also many specifics. The Ten Commandments contain some of these. It is God's will that we have no other gods before him,

that we do not worship even him by the use of images, that we do not misuse his name, that we remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, that we honor our parents, that we do not murder or commit adultery or steal or give false testimony or covet (Exod. 20). The Lord Jesus Christ amplified upon many of these commandments and added others. It is God's will that we be holy (1 Thess. 4:3). It is God's will that we should pray (1 Thess. 5:17). Above all Jesus taught that we are to "love each other" (John 15:12).

These things often do not seem good to us, because we are far from God and are still thinking in the world's way. Nevertheless, they are good, which we will discover if we will obey God in these areas and put his will into practice. As one of the great Romans commentators, Robert Haldane, says, "The will of God is here distinguished as good, because, however much the mind may be opposed to it and how much soever we may think that it curtails our pleasures and mars our enjoyments, obedience to God conduces to our happiness."

2. *The will of God is pleasing.* Pleasing to whom? Not to God, of course. That is obvious. Besides, we do not have to prove that God is pleased by his own will, nor could we. When Paul encourages us to prove that God's will is a pleasing will, he obviously means pleasing to us. That is, if we determine to walk in God's way, refusing to be conformed to the world and being transformed instead by the renewing of our minds, we will not have to fear that at the end of our lives we will look back and be dissatisfied or bitter, judging our lives to have been an utter waste. On the contrary, we will look back and conclude that our lives were well lived and be satisfied with them.

I was talking with a Christian man whose mother was dying. The mother was not a Christian, and she had become very bitter, although she had not been a bitter person before. She felt that everyone was turning against her, even her children, who actually were trying to help her. This man said to me, "I am convinced that Christians and non-Christians come to the end of their lives very differently. Those who are not Christians feel that they do not deserve to end their lives with

failing health and pain, and they think their lives have been wasted. Christians are satisfied with what God has led them through and has done for them. It is better to die as a Christian." I think that is exactly right. It is what Paul is saying.

3. *The will of God is perfect.* There are a number of words in the Greek language that are translated by our word *perfect.* One is *akribôs,* from which we get our word *accurate,* meaning correct. Another is *katartizô,* which means well fitted to a specific end, like a perfect solution to a puzzle. The word in Romans 12:2 is different. It is *teleios,* which has the thought of something that has attained its full destiny, is complete. It can be used of one who is mature, a mature adult. It is used of Jesus, who became a complete, or perfect, man. It is used of the end of history. In our text it means that those who do the will of God discover that it is not lacking in any respect. There is a satisfying wholeness about it.

To put this in negative form, it means that if we reach the end of our lives and are dissatisfied with them, this will only mean that we have been living in the world's way and have been conformed to it rather than having been transformed by the renewing of our minds. We will have been living for ourselves rather than for God and others.

We Need to Check It Out

The third obvious point of this verse is that we need to prove by our experience that the will of God is indeed what Paul tells us it is—good, pleasing, and perfect. We need to check it out. It is by checking it out that we will begin to find out what it actually is.

This is the exact opposite of our normal way of thinking. Usually we want God to tell us what his will for us is, and after that we want to be able to decide whether it is good, pleasing, or perfect, and thus whether or not we want to do it. Romans 12:2 tells us that we have to start living in God's way and that it is only as we do that we will begin to know it in its fullness and learn how good it really is. Robert Candlish says, "The will of God... can be known only by trial.... No one who is partaker of a finite nature and who occupies the position of a subject or servant under

the authority of God, under his law, can understand what... the will of God is otherwise than through actual experience. You cannot explain to him beforehand what the will of God is and what are its attributes or characteristics. He must learn this for himself. And he must learn it experimentally. He must prove in his own person and in his own personal history what is... 'that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.' "

God's Creatures and Probation

One of the most valuable parts of Candlish's study is the way he follows up on this idea, noting that the idea of proving the will of God experimentally goes a long way toward explaining the Bible's teaching about probation. This word is derived from the word *prove* and refers to a trial or test. According to Candlish, every order of free and intelligent being has been called upon to stand trial in the sense that ultimately it was created to prove that the will of God is good, pleasing, and perfect —or, if the creature should reject that will and fail the test, to prove that the contrary will of the world is disappointing and defective. Candlish reminds us of the following biblical examples.

1. *The angels.* We are not told much in the Bible about the trial of the angels, but it is certain that they did stand trial and that some of them failed that trial and so entered into the rebellion led by Satan and passed under the severe judgment of Almighty God.

Candlish speculates that the specific issue of that trial may have been the command to worship the Son of God: "When God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'" (Heb. 1:6). But whether or not this was the specific matter the angels of God were to prove good, pleasing, and perfect, it is clear that many did not regard God's will as such. It is why they rebelled against it. And even those who did adhere to God's will must have done so not knowing then the full goodness, satisfaction, or perfection of what they were being called upon to do. They have been learning it since by their

doing of it; that is, they have been learning it experimentally (cf. Eph. 3:8-11).

2. *Man in his pristine state.* The second case of probation is man in his pristine state. We know a great deal more about this than we do about the trial of the angels, since it concerns us most directly and is revealed to us for that reason. Adam and Eve were required to prove the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God in the matter of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, refusing to eat of it because God had forbidden it to them. We know how this turned out. When weighed against what they considered to be more desirable ("you will be like God, knowing good and evil," Gen. 3:5), our first parents chose the way of sin, ate of the tree, and paid the price of their transgression.

Candlish argues that if Adam and Eve had kept the will of God, though it did not seem desirable at that stage of their lives, "They would have found by experience that what God announced to them as his will was really in itself, as the seal of his previous covenant of life and as the preparation for the unfolding of his higher providence, fair, reasonable [and] good.... They would have learned experimentally that it was suited to their case and circumstances, deserving of their acceptance, sure to become more and more pleasing as they entered more and more into its spirit and became more and more thoroughly reconciled to the quiet simplicity of submission which it fostered."

But they did not prove it to be such and therefore brought sin, judgment, and death upon the race.

3. *The Lord Jesus Christ.* The third example is Jesus Christ, who in his incarnate state took it upon himself to prove that God's will was indeed good, pleasing, and perfect, even though it involved the pain of the cross, which in itself hardly seemed good, pleasing, or even acceptable.

In the garden Jesus prayed that the cross might be taken from him, adding, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). The author of

Hebrews says, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb. 5:7-8). In the Book of Philippians Paul speaks of Jesus humbling himself and becoming "obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:8).

Writes Candlish, "It must have been, it often was, with him a struggle—an effort—to do the will of God. It was not easy, it was not pleasant. It was self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-crucifixion throughout. It was repulsive to the highest and holiest instincts of his pure humanity. It laid upon him most oppressive burdens; it brought him into most distressing scenes; it involved him in ceaseless, often thankless toil; it exposed him to all sorts of uncongenial encounters with evil men and evil angels. But he proved it. And in the proving of it, and as he was proving it, he found it to be good and acceptable and perfect."

4. *Christians.* And what of ourselves, we who confess Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior? We are on trial now, and the matter of our probation is whether or not we will embrace the will of God for our lives, turning from the world and its ways, and so prove by the very embracing of that will that it is exactly what God declares it to be when he calls it perfect.

Who is to do that? You are, and you are to do it in the precise earthly circumstances into which God has placed you.

How are you to do it? You are to do it experimentally—that is, by actually putting the revealed will of God to the test.

When are you to do it? Right now and tomorrow and the day after that. You are to do it repeatedly and consistently and faithfully all through your life until the day of your death or until Jesus comes again.

Why are you to do it? Because it is the right thing to do, and because the will of God really is good, pleasing, and perfect.

Candlish says this:

Of the fashion of the world, it may be truly said that the more you try it, the less you find it to be satisfying. It looks well; it looks fair, at first. But who that has lived long has not found it to be vanity at last?

It is altogether otherwise with the will of God. That often looks worst at the beginning. It seems hard and dark. But on! On with you in the proving of it! Prove it patiently, perseveringly, with prayer and pains. And you will get growing clearness, light, enlargement, joy. You will more and more find that "the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." For "wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; and in keeping of them there is great reward."

Part Seventeen.

The Christian and Other People

Chapter 190.
First Things First

Romans 12:3

Some time ago I came across the story of a man who imagined himself to be quite spiritual. He was talking with a more mature friend, and he asked his friend to pray for him that he might be humble. "Pray for me that I might be nothing," he said.

His friend replied with some wisdom, probably thinking of 1 Corinthians 1:28, "You *are* nothing, brother. Take it by faith."

This is what Paul wants us to do in Romans 12:3, as he moves from his profound development of the first principles of the Christian life in Romans 12:1-2 to a discussion of a Christian's right relationship to other people that fills the remainder of the chapter. His words specifically combine a right estimation of ourselves with faith, though in a slightly different sense from my story. "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you," Paul says.

Robert S. Candlish outlines Romans 12 in three parts: (1) the Christian's relationship to God (vv. 1-2), (2) the Christian's relationship to the church (vv. 3-13), and (3) the Christian's relationship to a hostile world (vv. 14-21). If we follow his outline, we are at the start of section two, the Christian's relationship to the church. Much of what follows is indeed about the church, but it is important to see that in starting this discussion Paul focuses first on the Christian's estimate of himself alone, since he knows that none of us will ever properly evaluate and esteem other Christians within the fellowship of the church if our pride is in the way.

It is a matter of dealing with first things first—first, a right relationship with God; second, a proper evaluation of myself; third, a right relationship with other people.

Two Ways of Thinking

All of these relationships involve the mind, of course. Paul has been telling us not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but rather "to be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Now he spells out what this means, beginning, "Do not *think* of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather *think* of yourself with sober judgment."

Even in this English translation we cannot miss the fact that verse 3 repeats twice the idea of thinking. There is a wrong kind of thinking that we are to reject (thinking too highly of ourselves) and a right kind of thinking that we are to embrace (thinking soberly).

In the Greek text, however, the emphasis on right as opposed to wrong thinking is even stronger than this, since the word for thinking (*phronein*), occurs four times, twice with prefixes. *Phronein* means to make a right estimate of things. A fairly literal translation of verse 3 would go like this: "I say through the grace that is given to me, to every one of you, that you should not estimate yourself beyond what you should estimate, but that you should estimate yourself in such a way as to have a sensible estimate of yourself."

Two Common Errors

There are two possible errors in this kind of self-evaluation: 1. *To think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.* This is the greater of the two dangers, because it is the one that comes to us most naturally. The reason it does is that it is linked to pride, the first and most deadly of the seven deadly sins. Almost everyone thinks more highly of himself than he ought, and we also want other people to have similarly exalted opinions of us.

How do we think more highly of ourselves than we ought? Some people have high opinions of themselves because of their having been born

into a family distinguished because of its wealth or the achievement of some illustrious ancestor. People like this have a recognizable name—Astor, Rockefeller, or Dupont, for example. Perhaps they are related to someone who has achieved recognition in the media or because of public office. Name-droppers fit into this category. They are always telling you about the celebrity they had lunch with last week or the congressmen they will be speaking to tomorrow. Perhaps the person has achieved a recognizable name himself. She is mentioned in the press, or he has appeared on the major television talk shows.

In the last century in England there was a snob by the name of Oscar Browning. He wanted to meet Alfred Lord Tennyson, so he sought him out on the Isle of Wight, where Tennyson was staying, marched up to him, shook him by the hand and announced, "I am Browning."

Tennyson knew only one Browning, the poet Robert Browning. He looked at Oscar Browning carefully. "No, no you're not," he said and walked away.

It would be nice if this type of pride did not exist among Christians, but unfortunately, it does. Some take pride simply in knowing a Christian leader, or in working with him or her. Some take pride in their denomination or their particular church. They act as if it is more important to be a Presbyterian or an Episcopalian or a Baptist (or whatever else they might be) than to be a Christian.

Other people think more highly of themselves than they should because of their exceptional education. That is, they think they know more than other people or are simply smarter than others.

Still other individuals have high opinions of themselves because they have been given unusual power, or seek it. Not long ago Michael Scott Horton edited a book titled *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* in which he documented the pursuit of worldly power by evangelicals. He covered such important subjects as power politics, power evangelism, power growth, the power within, and power preachers. His conclusion:

Even in the Christian world there is a tremendous spirit of self-confidence and pride: our church growth projects will at last usher in the kingdom; or we will do it by performing signs and wonders, what some proponents even refer to as "magic," or perhaps we will rule by taking over the public institutions and exerting political, social and economic pressure on the enemies of Christ; others may wish to achieve power through tapping the inner resources of the individual through the latest offerings of pop-psychology; some will demonstrate this self-confidence by reinforcing personality cults, legalistic restrictions and peer pressure; finally, some will appeal to the power of fear and paranoia to gather followings, as if they had an inside tract on such divine secrets as the date of our Lord's return. Evangelical gatherings are often marked by a certain smugness about the uniqueness of our generation in God's plan.

None of this is unique to our time, of course. We see it in all ages of the Christian church. We remember, for instance, that Paul was writing Romans from Corinth on his third missionary journey—that is, while he was living in the midst of a church that had been marked by the pursuit of such worldly goals as family prestige, education, and political power. He reminded these people of their humble origin, thus encouraging them not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think—the very thing he is doing in Romans: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

2. *To think too lowly of ourselves, a false humility.* The second error in our evaluation of ourselves is to think too lowly of ourselves and so exude a false kind of humility. Sometimes this is really pride, because when we tell people bad things about ourselves what we really want

them to say is, "No, I don't think you're like that at all. I think you're really intelligent (or wise or attractive or kind or whatever)."

"That helps," we say. "Keep it up. Tell me more. I'd like you to talk me out of this."

When we act like that we are really being proud rather than humble, and we show it at once if the other person agrees with our earlier negative self-evaluation. We are offended when a friend says, "Yes, I guess you really are stupid" (or ugly or ineffective or a hopeless case).

On the other hand, some people really do have too low an opinion of themselves and need to find a proper self-esteem. These people need to do this not by propping themselves up artificially— that is, by telling themselves that they are brilliant when they are not, or beautiful when they are plain, or effective when they are actually ineffective and bungling—but rather by finding a proper self-evaluation in spiritual terms. If they are Christians, they need to recognize that they have been made by God and that, however ineffective they may feel—and actually be—in themselves, they are important to God, who has made them to do "good works" (Eph. 2:10).

The Right Way to Think about Ourselves

One of the problems we have is that we usually think about ourselves too much. Yet the solution Paul offers is not to stop thinking about ourselves entirely but instead to start thinking about ourselves in a right way. This has two parts: (1) We are to think of ourselves "with sober judgment" and (2) We are to think of ourselves "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given."

1. *With sober judgment.* Not long ago I was reading a study of Romans by the late Ray Stedman, former pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church of Palo Alto, California. He said that every morning when he got up he tried to remind himself of three things:

First, I am made in the image of God. I am not an animal and I don't have to behave like an animal. I have an ability within me, given to me

by God himself, to respond and relate to God. Therefore I can behave as a man and not as a beast.

Second, I am filled with the Spirit of God. The most amazing thing has happened! Though I don't deserve it in the least degree, I have the power of God at work within me. I have become, in some sense, the bearer of God, and God himself is willing to be at work in me through the problems and pressures I go through this day.

Third, I am part of the plan of God. God is working out all things to a great and final purpose in the earth, and I am part of it. What I do today has purpose and significance and meaning. This is not a meaningless day I am going through. Even the smallest incident, the most apparently insignificant word or relationship, is involved in his great plan. Therefore all of it has meaning and purpose.

Stedman says rightly that there is nothing better than this to set us up on our feet and give us
"confidence without conceit." When we think of ourselves in this way we are indeed thinking soberly and evaluating ourselves as God's creatures without either vanity or a lack of proper selfesteem.

2. *In accordance with the measure of faith God has given.* The second phrase Paul uses for thinking rightly about ourselves is "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." This is a little bit more than simply seeing ourselves as made in the image of God, given the Holy Spirit of God, and having part in the overall plan of God. It involves what each one of us is uniquely—that is, as different from other people—and it leads to the discussion of spiritual gifts that follows in this chapter.

Faith here can be taken in three ways: (1) our confidence or trust in God —hence, "Think of yourself... in accordance with the measure of your actual trust in God" (that is, "not as trusting God more than you actually do"); (2) our knowledge of God or of "the faith" God has revealed— hence, "Think of yourself... according to the degree of knowledge about yourself and all people that you have attained" (that is, don't exaggerate

the human condition); or (3) our individual spiritual gifts received by faith—hence, "Think of yourself... in accordance with the specific gifts or talents God has given you."

This last meaning is the most unusual, but it is the one to be preferred here because of the context. The first part of verse 3 looks back to what Paul has said in verses 1 and 2. We are to think "soberly" as one aspect of what it means to have a renewed mind. The second part of verse 3 looks ahead to what is going to be said about gifts. We are to understand that the church contains many members and that these have been given and exercise diverse endowments. We do not have all of these gifts ourselves, and we are to evaluate our contribution to the church on the basis of the gifts we have, not on the basis of another's talents.

John Murray says, "It is called the measure of faith in the restricted sense of the faith that is suited to the exercise of this gift, and this nomenclature is used to emphasize the cardinal place which faith occupies not only in our becoming members of this community but also in the specific functions performed as members of it."

So part of a genuine humility has to do with understanding the spiritual endowments God has given us, taking this seriously, and beginning to use those gifts for God. This is exactly where the remainder of this paragraph is going, of course. For after teaching us in the next two sentences that the church is made up of many diverse members and that these members possess different spiritual gifts, Paul continues: "If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully" (vv. 6-8).

Each of us is responsible for discovering what our particular gifts are and using them. It is a false humility that says, "I don't have anything to offer to anyone. God can't use me." **For the Glory of God**

In Romans 12 Paul is speaking specifically of spiritual gifts—those that are to be exercised for spiritual ends within the fellowship and outreach of the church: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, and showing mercy. But I think we are also to have a sober assessment of our natural abilities and acquired skills and that we are to use these to God's glory also. This is particularly true in our secular employment.

I think of a story told by Harry Ironside, a great Bible teacher of an earlier generation. Ironside's father died when he was quite young, so during his school days, on vacations, and on Saturdays, Ironside used to work for a Scottish shoemaker named Dan Mackay. The man was a Christian from the Orkney Islands who did his work well, and as he had opportunity he would speak to his customers about the importance of being born again.

Ironside's responsibility was to pound leather for the soles of the shoes. The cut cowhide was soaked in water and then placed on a piece of iron and pounded until it was hard and dry. This toughened the leather and made the soles last longer, but the pounding took a long time.

One day Ironside was walking by another cobbler's shop, and he saw that the owner was not pounding the leather soles at all. He simply took the soles out of the water and nailed them to the upper portion of the shoes with the water splashing out as he drove the nails in. Ironside went inside and asked him why he was doing his work that way. "Are they just as good as if they were pounded?" he asked.

The cobbler gave him a naughty wink and answered, "They come back all the quicker this way, my boy!"

Ironside thought he had learned something important. So he went back to the Christian cobbler, his boss, and suggested that maybe he was wasting his time pounding the leather to toughen it and get it dry. Mr. Mackay stopped his work and opened his Bible to Colossians 3:23-24, where he read, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as

working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward."

He said, "Harry, I don't cobble shoes just for the money I get from my customers. I am doing this for the glory of God. I expect to see every shoe I have ever repaired in a big pile at the judgment seat of Christ, and I do not want the Lord to say to me in that day, 'Dan, this was a poor job. You did not do your best here.' I want him to be able to say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' "

Let me give a more recent example. Several years ago Charles Colson, the head of Prison Fellowship, and Jack Eckerd, founder of the well-known Eckerd Drug Store chain, teamed up on a book called *Why America Doesn't Work,* which examines America's loss of a sound work ethic. Their conclusion is that the problem is spiritual and that it requires spiritual solutions. Their suggestions concern a sober evaluation of ourselves as God's work and of why God has given us the work we have to do in life. "Why, then, should we work?" they ask. Here are their answers:

Because work gives expression to our creative gifts and thus fulfills our need for meaning and purpose.

Because work is intrinsically good when done with the proper attitude and motive.

Because we are commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth, participating in the work of creation in a way that glorifies God.

Because we are citizens of this earth and have certain responsibilities to our fellow citizens.

It is this moral character of work that historically has been the very heart of the work ethic.

So you see how practical this all is. A proper humility in which we learn to think soberly about ourselves does not lead to self-abnegation or inactivity, which honors no one. Instead it leads to the energetic use of every gift and talent God has given, knowing that they have come from

him—that no glory is ever due to us—but because they do come from him, they must be used faithfully and wholeheartedly for his glory.

Chapter 191.
One Body in Christ

Romans 12:4-5

Anyone who is interested in the doctrine of the church and senses its importance must be a bit surprised to notice how little the word *church* actually occurs in the Bible. It is not found in the Old Testament at all. The first time it occurs is in Matthew 16:18, then again in Matthew 18:17. It is not in the other gospels. It is scattered throughout Acts, of course (about eighteen times), but it is found only five times in Romans, all in chapter 16 (vv. 1, 3, 5, 16, 23). There are quite a few instances in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians (eighteen and nine times respectively), but then the references become infrequent again. In the New International Version of the Bible the singular word *church* occurs only seventy-nine times. The explanation, of course, is that although the word *church* is itself relatively infrequent, the doctrine of the church is discussed many more times by other words and images.

That is the case in our text. Paul is beginning to talk about the church in Romans 12:4-5. His discussion is going to deal with church unity, the distribution of diverse gifts among the members of the church, and the way Christians in the church are to behave toward one another. But Paul does not use the word *church.* Instead he speaks of Christ's body: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form *one body,* and each member belongs to all the others." This is an important text, because "the body of Christ" is a powerful image for the church. As we might expect, it is also found numerous other places in Paul's writings.

What Is the Church?

Most of us know that the church is not a building, though we say, "I'm going to church," meaning a building, or we speak about "building a church," again meaning a building. We know that the church is people. But how do these people fit into a particular congregation or a denomination in our thinking? We talk about the Episcopal Church or the Presbyterian Church or the Baptist Church. Are they "churches," even "the one true church" as some claim? Are they even churches at all? And what about the people in these denominations? Are all of them members of the church? If so, in what sense? Does membership in a particular organization make you a church member? What about those who watch services on television? Or what about those who were baptized and attended church at one time but who no longer attend?

Paul's image is very helpful at this point. For when he speaks of the body of Christ, obviously he is speaking of those who belong to Christ, who are joined to him in exactly the sense in which he speaks about our being joined to Christ in Romans 5 and elsewhere. This is a spiritual reality, invisible but supremely real. It is something that is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, and it has to do with faith in Christ, by which we become new creatures, having passed out of our death-union with Adam to a new life-union with the Savior.

Charles Colson has written a book on the church called *The Body,* in which he complains of a lack of definition and identity by supposedly Christian people. "The church—the body of God's people—has little to do with slick marketing or fancy facilities. It has everything to do with the people and the Spirit of God in their midst," he says.

John Stott has written, "The church is a people, a community of people, who owe their existence, their solidarity and their corporate distinctness from other communities to one thing only—the call of God."

Strictly speaking, the church of Jesus Christ, created by Jesus from among all peoples, is a New
Testament reality. That is why the word *church* is found only in the New Testament. It is why

Jesus used the future tense when he replied to Peter's great confession in Matthew 16 by saying, "On this rock *I will build* my church" (v. 18). This church began at Pentecost when people from all nations were brought to faith in Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Acts lists them as having been "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs" (2:9-11).

But this is not quite the whole story. If the church is the community of those who have been called by God, as Stott suggests in his definition of the church, then the Old Testament believers belonged to the church of Jesus Christ too. This is because they looked forward to Christ's coming and were joined to him by faith, just as we look back.

The key concept here is the covenant. This covenant is expressed in God's call of particular individuals (and not others) and by his entering into a formal agreement to save, protect, and bless them. For their part, the individuals are required to believe, worship, and obey God. Adam and Eve were part of this initial covenant, and so were their godly descendants listed in Genesis 5. We see the idea of a covenant formally and most clearly set out in God's calling of Abraham, with whom a special stage in the history of the Old Testament "church" begins. God said, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you" (Gen. 12:1-2). Later that covenant was ratified by a ceremony in which God foretold the future history of Abraham's descendants and promised them a land of their own, "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18; see vv. 12-21). Abraham's response was to believe God and worship him.

We find the same pattern in God's dealings with Isaac, Abraham's son, and with Jacob, his grandson. In each case the call of God is joined to a covenant promise, and this is followed by faith, worship, and obedience on the people's part. The church consists of all these people, those

whom God has called from all times and from all places and has joined to Jesus Christ.

There Is One Body, One Church

Paul's image of the church as Christ's body not only defines the church as the community of those who have been joined to Christ, but it also teaches that there is only one church. There is but one church because Jesus has but one body.

Ephesians 4:4-6 parallels the ideas we find in Romans 12, only with greater elaboration since Ephesians is essentially a book about the church. Significantly, this passage occurs at the same point in Ephesians as our passage in Romans does, where Paul begins to apply the earlier doctrine of salvation to Christian living. He talks about believers being "humble and gentle," for example. Then he talks about the unity of the church, saying, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). There are seven important unities in this passage:

1. *One body.* This is an important image for the church, because it pictures it as an organic whole rather than as a machine that is made up of independent parts. The church is not an airplane, a train, or an automobile. It is an organism in which the parts are alive and both support and depend on one another. In 1 Corinthians Paul writes, "God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:24-26).

2. *One Spirit.* The word *Spirit* is capitalized in this phrase because Paul is not thinking here that Christians share the same spirit in the sense that they are one in their enthusiasms and goals. He is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing us to Christ. We

are all different. We have come to Christ along different roads. Nevertheless, the reason we have come along those roads at all is that the same Holy Spirit has been drawing us, so that at the theological level our conversion experiences are the same. We have all been awakened to our need. We have all been made alive in Christ. We have all believed on him. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is performing a work of sanctification in each of us, so that we are all working for Christ and are beginning to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

3. *One hope.* Today the word *hope* usually means something that is uncertain. But in the New Testament it refers to what is sure and certain but for which we wait. Paul calls this "*one* hope" because it embraces a unifying set of beliefs among Christians—namely, the return of Jesus Christ, the Resurrection, and the Final Judgment. Another way of thinking about the Christian's hope is to say that when Jesus returns we are going to be with him, all of us. People from all races and nations and economic backgrounds will be together with Jesus, and the many things that divide us now will be forgotten. If that is so, shouldn't there be ways in which we reach across denominational, racial, and other barriers and work together now? Shouldn't we be able to demonstrate our unity better than we do?

4. *One Lord.* To hear some Christians talk, you would think that there are many Lords. "I know a Jesus who causes me to do this, which excludes you," some say. Or, "Your Jesus isn't the Jesus I know." Well, there is such a thing as believing in or proclaiming a false Christ, who is not the Lord. We are not to have fellowship with unbelief. But usually that is not our problem. Our real problem is that we distrust Christians who are not made precisely in our mold. We need to

realize that if others really believe in Christ, then the fact that we have this same Lord should draw us together.

5. *One faith.* This is not the subjective *faith* that we must have to be Christians. Here the word is being used objectively to refer to the content of faith, or the gospel, and it is teaching that there is only one body of genuine Christian doctrine, whatever our own limited understanding of it may be. Indeed, if we are really Christians, our differences must be in minor areas since by definition we all believe the major doctrines. As a rule, it would be helpful for us to explore the areas in which we agree with other Christians before we explore the points at which we differ.

6. *One baptism.* It is interesting that Paul should include baptism in a list of things that unite us since a diverse understanding of baptism is one of the things that has divided denominations most severely. The explanation, of course, is that Paul is not thinking of modes of baptism or even whether infants should be baptized. He is thinking of baptism as the sacrament in which we are publicly identified with Christ. If you have been identified with Jesus Christ by baptism, then you are also identified with all others who have likewise been baptized in his name.

7. *One God.* The final point of unity is "one God." We notice here that the first three of these points are grouped around the Holy Spirit: one body, one Spirit, one hope. The next three are grouped around the Lord Jesus Christ: one Lord, one faith, one baptism. This last item concerns the first person of the Godhead only.

Why is this the order? Probably because Paul is thinking from the effect to the cause. He begins with our being part of the church, and he asks, in effect, "How did we get to be part of the church?" The answer is: By the Holy Spirit joining us to Christ. The Holy Spirit made us part of one body and gave us one hope. Next question: "What, then, is the church? "Answer: Those who have Jesus Christ as Lord, who have believed on him and his work, and who have been identified with him publicly by baptism. The final questions are: But why did Jesus do this? And where did the idea of the church come from anyway? The answer is: Because

it was God the Father's plan. The idea of the church comes from God the "Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

John Stott talks about the Trinity as the essential basis for church unity and sums it up like this: "There can be only one Christian family, only one Christian faith, hope and baptism, and only one Christian body, because there is only One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You can no more multiply churches than you can multiply Gods. Is there only one God? Then he has only one church. Is the unity of God inviolable? Then so is the unity of the church.... It is no more possible to split the church than it is possible to split the Godhead."

The Problem with the Church Today

And yet we have split the church, or at least the visible church that people see. John Stott's concern in the book *One People* is that we have done it by dividing the clergy from the laity. His book is designed to recapture a proper lay ministry. Charles Colson is concerned about our institutions and our individualism. He wants to revive the spiritual vitality of Christ's body. Donald Grey Barnhouse, in his studies of Romans, was troubled by the way we have turned minor points of doctrine into major causes for division. He wanted to overcome that arrogance.

We see this problem on several levels today:

1. *The institutional problem.* The division or disunity of the church is a problem at the institutional level, of course. In the hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers," we sing:

> We are not divided, all one body we; one in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

But even as we sing it, we know it is not true. Or we recite the Apostles' Creed, containing the words, "I believe in... the holy catholic church." *Catholic* means universal, broad, diverse, united. But though we may believe in a universal church, we seem to restrict our thoughts of the church to our own particular fellowship or denomination. It is this

institutional problem that has captured the attention of some Christian leaders and through them has been a driving force behind the wellintentioned but misdirected and mostly unsuccessful ecumenical movement.

2. *Individualism.* It strikes me, however, that today the problem is not so much our institutions, since they do not mean a whole lot to most people anyway, but rather our individualism, which I would define as hyperpersonalized religion. It is the religion of "Jesus and me only." It is what sociologists and pollsters uncover whenever they explore America's religious attitudes and practices.

Many people know the name of Robert Bellah, author of the sociological study of American life called *The Habits of the Heart*. Bellah says that America has been infected with a virulent virus that he calls "radical individualism." It affects every area of life. People make up their own rules for everything, entirely apart from other people, and as a result they sometimes do terrible things to others. This "radical individualism" is particularly noticeable in religion. According to a *USA Today* survey, of the 56 percent of Americans who attend church, 46 percent do so because "it is good for you" (that is, "good for *me*"), and 26 percent go because it is where they hope to find "peace of mind and spiritual well-being." Truth—that is, specific doctrine—does not seem important to these people.

In Bellah's study there is a report of a woman named Sheila who considers herself to be very religious. "What is your religion?" she was asked. "I call it 'Sheilaism,'" she answered. "It's just my own little voice." The word for this is *narcissism,* derived from the ancient story of
Narcissus, a young Greek athlete who was in love with himself and spent his time by a quiet pool staring at his own reflection. It is a part of being conformed to this world rather than being transformed by the renewing of our minds, and it is a radical departure from what religion in America used to be, and should be. "Today religion in America is as private and diverse as New England colonial religion was public and unified," says Robert Bellah. Clearly you cannot have "one body in

Christ" if everyone is creating a private little a la carte religion for himself.

Maintain the Bond

So what is the challenge to informed biblical Christians in an age like ours? Well, the answer is not the ecumenical movement. Our task is not to create the unity of the body, above all not from the top down. The unity of the body is a given for those who are "in Christ." Nevertheless, we should work for any valid visible expression of our oneness in Christ that is attainable, and we should avoid unnecessary divisions and even try to learn from one another in a humble, teachable spirit, which is the point at which Paul started in verse 3.

In his study of this passage in his volumes on Romans, Donald Grey Barnhouse tells how he once made slighting remarks about a denomination he considered to be on the fringe of genuine Christianity. A minister from this denomination was present and afterwards told Barnhouse how grieved he was at what he considered an unjust judgment. Barnhouse apologized, and it was agreed that he would meet for lunch with four or five ministers from this particular church.

When they got together, Barnhouse, who had suggested the luncheon, made the additional suggestion that during lunch they should discuss only the points on which they agreed. Afterwards, when they had finished, they could talk about their differences. They began to talk about Jesus Christ and what he meant to each of them. The tension abated, and there was a measure of joy as each confessed that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he came to die for our sins and then rose again bodily. Each acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord. Each agreed that Jesus was now in heaven at the right hand of God the Father praying for his church. They confessed that he had sent his Holy Spirit at Pentecost and that the Lord was living in each of his children by means of the Holy Spirit. They acknowledged the reality of the new birth and that they were looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ, after which they would be spending eternity together.

By this time the meal was drawing to a close. And when they turned to the matters that divided them, they found that they were indeed secondary—not unimportant, but secondary—and they recognized that they were areas in which they could agree to disagree without denying that each was nevertheless a member of Christ's body. Barnhouse confessed, "Though separated by a continent, I have often prayed for these men and am confident that they have prayed for me. We know that we are one in Christ. They made a distinct contribution to my spiritual life, and I contributed to theirs. I am the richer since I became acquainted with them." Something like that would be a very good experience for most of us.

Chapter 192.
God's Gifts to Christ's Body

Romans 12:6-8

In the last study we began to look at the doctrine of the church as it is presented to us under the image of Christ's body. This is a very rich image, and we saw two things it teaches. First, it teaches what it is to be a member of the church. To be a church member means to be a part of Christ's body, and this means that a person who is a member of the church must be joined to him. It is not a question of merely belonging to an organization, though that is also important in its place. It means to be united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit so that we are no longer in Adam but "in Jesus." It is a spiritual reality.

The second thing we have seen about the church presented under the image of Christ's body is that it is a unity. That is, there is only one church just as there is only one body. You can no more have multiple churches than you can have multiple Christs or a multiple Godhead.

But the image of the church as Christ's body also signifies something else, and that is diversity in unity. It is what Paul is chiefly talking about in Romans 12, for he has just written, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same

function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (vv. 4-5). Paul calls the parts of the body "members." We are those members. So the image teaches that Christians have different gifts and are to function differently from others in the use of these gifts, while nevertheless being a part of the body and contributing to the body's unity.

Diversity of Gifts

Different gifts! It is hard for many of us to recognize this and accept it, because we are always wanting other Christians to be like us and function like us, or be cogs in our machine rather than contributing to another Christian's work. Paul knew Christians who had this trouble too, but he tells everyone that we must accept this diversity if the church is to function as it should.

This was important to Paul. *Charismata*, the word translated *gifts*, occurs seventeen times in the New Testament; sixteen of those occurrences are in Paul's writings.

Charismata is based on the word *grace* (*charis*) and actually means "a grace gift." It is something given to the people of God by God or, as can also be said, by Jesus Christ. Since grace is God's unmerited favor, the word indicates that spiritual gifts are dispensed by God according to his pleasure and that the gifts will differ. Every Christian has at least one gift, like the people who received talents in Christ's parables. Moreover, since these are given by God, they are to be used for his glory and according to his plans rather than to enhance our own glory or further our plans. This is where the thrust toward unity comes in. Each member of the body is to work toward the well-being of the whole so that when one member does well all the others do well and when one member suffers the entire body suffers.

Another way of saying this is to say that we not only belong to Christ, we also belong to one another. John Murray says of Christians, "They have property in one another and therefore in one another's gifts and graces." It would be correct to add that you, as a Christian, have a right

to the gifts the other members of the body have been given, and they have a right to your gift. You cheat them if you do not use it, and you are poorer if you do not depend on them.

Exercising the Gifts

What these spiritual gifts are is not easy to say, because every time there is a listing of the gifts in the New Testament—five times in all (Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:8-10 and 28-30, Eph. 4:11, 1 Peter 4:11)—the specific items differ. Ephesians 4:11 seems to give the most basic list: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers. This is the way 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 starts too, but then it moves from what seems to be offices in the church to specific functions like working miracles, healing, helping, administering, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues. Romans 12:6-8 has a bit of both. First Peter 4:11 has only service and speaking, but these two items are categories into which other gifts fit.

Nineteen gifts are mentioned in these five lists, but the number is not absolute. Different words may describe the same gift, as with serving and helping, and there are probably gifts that could be mentioned but are not. Seven gifts are mentioned in Romans 12:

1. *Prophesying.* The first is prophesying. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 this gift comes immediately after and is closely linked to the gift of "apostles." There were no apostles in the church at Rome at this time, so Paul does not mention apostles in the Romans list.

In our day the word *prophesy* retains only a shade of its former meaning, "foretelling the future." In the Old and New Testaments a prophet is one who speaks the words of God. The Greek word for prophet literally means "one who stood in front of another person and spoke for him." An example is the relationship between Moses and his brother Aaron. Moses was unwilling to accept God's call to go to Egypt, stand before Pharaoh, and demand that he let Israel go, because, as he said, "I have never been eloquent" (Exod. 4:10). God answered that he would send Aaron to speak for him. "You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth.... He will speak to the people for you, and it will be

as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him" (vv. 1516). Later this is explained by these words: "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet" (Exod. 7:1).

This is the sense in which Abraham is called a prophet in Genesis 20:7, because God spoke to him and he spoke God's words to other people. It is the same in the New Testament (Luke 7:2628, John 4:19; cf. Matt. 10:41; 13:57; Luke 4:24). There seem to have been quite a few such prophets in the early church, so much so that Paul devotes nearly the whole of 1 Corinthians 14 to discussing the gift of prophecy and the gift of tongues, which is closely linked to it. From this and other passages it would seem that the prophets were men who spoke under the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit to communicate a doctrine, remind people of a duty, or give a warning (cf. Acts 21:10-14).

Charles Hodge expresses it this way in his commentary on Romans: "The point of distinction between them [prophets] and the apostles, considered as religious teachers, appears to have been that the inspiration of the apostles was abiding, they were the infallible and authoritative messengers of Christ; whereas the inspiration of the prophets was occasional and transient. The latter differed from the teachers (*didaskaloi*), inasmuch as these were not necessarily inspired, but taught to others what they themselves had learned from the Scriptures or from inspired men."

The gift of prophecy in this sense, like the gift of apostleship, is something that is no longer with the church since, having the completed Old and New Testaments, we no longer need it. The Bible is for us the recorded testimony of these inspired men.

The really fascinating item in this mention of prophecy is the attached phrase "let him use it in proportion to his faith." The word translated *proportion* is the word *analogia* (analogue or analogy), which has given expositors the important hermeneutical principle known as the analogy of faith. This is the only place where these words occur in the Bible, but they have been seen to teach what is usually described as the need to compare one Scripture with another so that a passage that is clearly

understood throws light on one less clear. From this principle derive the additional guidelines of a necessary unity and noncontradiction in the Bible.

There is some doubt as to whether this is exactly what is meant here. But whatever Paul means, he is implying some control of or limitation on the prophet. The last words of the phrase are literally "the faith" (not "his faith," as in the NIV). So if "the analogy of *the* faith" is meant, it would mean that even the prophet is bound by prior revelation. He is not to propound anything contrary to "the faith" that has already been delivered to the saints. We remember that in Galatians 1:8, Paul applied this test to both the apostles and angels, insisting that even they have to conform to the standard of right doctrine: "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"

If this does not refer to the analogy of faith and means only that the prophet is to speak in accordance with the measure of his own personal faith, it still implies a limitation, because the prophet is not to go beyond what God has given him to speak. So here is a contemporary application. If that was true of the ancient prophets, how much more true ought it to be of Bible teachers today. Anyone who is called to teach must be rigidly disciplined so as not to go beyond what God has actually revealed in Scripture. Our task is to expound the whole counsels, but *only* the whole counsels of God.

2. *Serving.* The next spiritual gift is serving. This Greek word is sometimes also translated *ministry and* applied to the "ministry [that is, teaching] of the word [of God]" (cf. Acts 6:4). But since teaching is mentioned next we should probably think of ministry more broadly here, that is, as embracing all kinds of ministry for the sake of Christ.

What is important to note is that the Greek word *diakonian* is the root of our word *deacon.* So what is being spoken of here is a diaconal, or service, ministry. Does this refer to the specific office of a deacon or deaconess in the church, as in Acts 6:1-6? Yes, but not only that. In the church all are called to serve others, though some are given this gift in

special measure in order to lead others in the work. We need to remember that even Jesus was a deacon in that, as he said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

So let's do it! That is what the text says. In the case of prophecy, we are told that the prophet is to prophesy according to the "analogy" of faith or "in proportion to his faith." That is a qualification or directive. That is not the case here. Here the text just says, "If it is serving, let him serve." In other words, just do it!

In Charles Colson's book *The Body,* there are three quotations that stress service. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, said to his missionaries to India: "Go to the Indian as a brother, which indeed you are, and show the love which none can doubt you feel... eat, drink and dress and live by his side. Speak his language, share his sorrow."

Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravians, told his missionaries: "Do not lord it over the unbelievers but simply live among them; preach not theology but the crucified Christ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The church is herself only when she exists for humanity.... She must take her part in the social life of the world, not lording it over men, but helping and serving them. She must tell men, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to live for others." In *Life Together,* a study of the meaning of Christian fellowship, Bonhoeffer has a whole chapter stressing the ministry of Christians to other Christians. It is, he says, a ministry of holding one's tongue, meekness, listening, helping, bearing burdens, yes, and also speaking the truth when it is needed. Each of us has a service ministry to perform, because each of us is called to be like Jesus Christ. Where can you serve? Where can you serve that you are not serving now?

3. *Teaching.* In one way or another, by one word or another, this gift occurs in each of the five New Testament lists. It is a critical gift, of course, the more so today since the gifts of apostleship and prophecy have ceased. I am sure that many have this gift. Ray Stedman says that

in his opinion probably a third of all Christians have it and should be using it. If you know anything about Jesus and the gospel, you should teach what you know, formally if you have the opportunity but also informally by a casual word or testimony. You will be surprised what you are able to teach others.

I am a pastor. This is the preeminent gift of pastors, and this leads me to say to pastors that, having been called to teach, they must teach. No one has the opportunity a pastor has for carefully studying and faithfully expounding the Bible. What is more, if he does not do it, then in most churches it will not be done at all. Teaching is hard work, because we must learn ourselves before we teach. But what better calling can one have? So get on with it, and be faithful in it, if that is your gift. I notice that Paul handles his admonition here exactly as he handled it when he spoke of serving earlier, and as he will speak of encouraging later. No fuss. No fanfare. Just do it.

4. *Encouraging.* Encouragement has become a rather weak word for us, usually meaning little more than giving someone a slap on the back and saying "Good job" or "Well done." When we study the use of this word in the Bible, however, we find it is much more than this. The Greek word appears 107 times in the New Testament, and it is translated by such additional, powerful verbs as *beseech*, *comfort*, *desire*, *pray*, *entreat*, and *console*. It is the same word used of the Holy Spirit and his ministry in John 14-16. The New International Version translates it as

Counselor (in John 14:15, 26; 15:26; 16:7), but the Greek is *parakletos*, which literally means "one who is called in alongside another to help out." Counselor is a synonym for *lawyer,* and it is worth noting that the precise Latin translation of *parakletos* is *advocatus*, which also means "one who is called alongside of," and that *advocate* is also a synonym for *lawyer.* If we put this thought into our passage, we get something like "Let the person who has the gift of getting alongside another person to help him or her, really do it. Let him stand by his friend and really help him."

What a tremendous need we have for those who are like that. Many people are hurting, but there are not many helping, because we are all so absorbed in ourselves and our own private affairs. We are living in a narcissistic age, another "Me Decade."

Exhortation was the gift of Barnabas, who traveled with Paul. In Acts 4:36 we are told that his real name was Joseph but that he was named Barnabas because Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement," and that is what he was. We may remember how he stood by John Mark to help him when Paul refused to take Mark along on one of his missionary journeys because he had deserted them earlier. Barnabas got alongside Mark, lifted him up, and reestablished him as a useful servant of Christ, which Paul acknowledged later (2 Tim. 4:11).

5. *Contributing to the needs of others.* John Calvin and some of the earlier commentators thought that this gift referred to an official church office—that is, to the diaconate that is particularly entrusted with this task. But there is no need to limit this to some official position, and most modern scholars do not. The deciding element seems to be Paul's teaching that those who have this gift are to give "generously." That is an appropriate thing to say if the person involved is giving out of his or her own funds. But the deacons administer the church's funds, and if this refers to deacons, it would be more appropriate to tell them to give carefully, judiciously, or prayerfully, realizing that it is other people's money they are handling.

Are you generous with what you have been given? Some people are so poor it is hard to imagine how they could give anything. But statistics tell us that it is the poor who are most generous in terms of proportionate giving. The very rich are the least generous. Do you have enough to eat, clothes to wear, a place to live, even money in the bank? Then think how you can best be generous with those who are needy or have nothing.

6. *Leadership.* It is interesting that Paul includes leadership in his list of Christian gifts. The word actually means government or good

> administration, and it includes the task of management. This is an important quality to look for in elders, since they need to "manage," or "take care of God's church" (1 Tim. 3:5).

The excellent Swiss commentator F. Godet points out how important this must have been in the early church, when so many of the institutions we take for granted were lacking:

> Think of the numerous works of private charity which believers then had to found and maintain! Pagan society had neither hospitals nor orphanages, free schools or refuges [rescue missions], like those of our day. The church impelled by the instinct of Christian charity, had to introduce all these institutions into the world; hence no doubt, in every community, spontaneous gatherings of devout men and women who, like our present Christian committees, took up one or other of these needful objects, and had of course at their head directors charged with the responsibility of the work. Such are the persons certainly whom the apostle has in view in our passage.

I am not sure that this is exactly what Paul had in mind when he wrote this. But it is certainly one way this gift functions in the church, and it points to a similar and continuing need today. All the organizations we have require management. Those who manage well deserve honor.

7. *Showing mercy.* The final gift is showing mercy, and Paul's point is that this should be done cheerfully, not begrudgingly. The Greek word is *hilarotêti*, which gives us our word *hilarious.* How much we need a cheerful, hilarious spirit in the church! Too often our faces are grim and there is no spirit of joy to be found anywhere.

You and the Gift God Has Given

I close with a paragraph from Ray Stedman, who has written on spiritual gifts in a more helpful way than anyone I know. He asks in his study of Romans 12, "Who are you anyway?" It is a good question for us to ask. Stedman answers:

I am a son of God among the sons of men. I am equipped with the power of God to labor today. In the very work given me today God will be with me, doing it through me. I am gifted with special abilities to help people in various areas, and I don't have to wait until Sunday to use these gifts. I can use them anywhere. I can exercise the gift God has given me as soon as I find out what it is, by taking note of my desires and by asking others what they see in me and by trying out various things. I am going to set myself to the lifelong task of keeping that gift busy.

Paul told Timothy, "Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you" (2 Tim. 1:6). That is exactly what you should do. You have a gift. The rest of the body needs it. You will be accountable for what you do with it. Use it so that one day you will hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

Chapter 193.
The Greatest Thing in the World

Romans 12:9

After the first two verses of Romans 12, which establish the principles by which sound doctrine is to be applied to godly living, Paul has begun to write about the church. His words are not abstract theologizing: He is thinking of the people who make up the church, and his words have to do first with the humility that allows each to assess himself with sober judgment, and second with the knowledge that God has given spiritual gifts to all members of the church and that these must be exercised faithfully for the benefit of all. This line of thought continues in what follows, although in verse 9 the apostle moves from his discussion of spiritual gifts, which are of various sorts and appear in various individuals, to virtues that must be seen in all who call themselves Christians.

"Characteristically," says Australian professor Leon Morris, "he begins with love."

This same sequence, from a discussion of spiritual gifts to discussion of love, is found in 1 Corinthians, though on a larger scale. In that letter Paul talks about the gifts in chapter 12. This corresponds to Romans 12:4-8. Then he passes to the well-known hymn about love that is chapter 13. Romans 12:9-13 corresponds to 1 Corinthians 13.

In this study we begin with verse 9, which introduces the subject. What follows, in verses 10-13, is a further elaboration of how love functions. We will look at those verses in the next study.

Henry Drummond's Sermon

In 1883 the Scottish scientist and evangelist Henry Drummond gave a famous inspirational lecture at a mission station in central Africa called "The Greatest Thing in the World." It was about love, and it was based on 1 Corinthians 13, the great chapter on love—particularly on the last words: "But the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). Drummond was not what we would call an evangelical. I would judge from this and others of his writings I have read that he was basically a Christian humanist in that he believed that the Christian virtues could themselves, if sincerely practiced, save the world. There is not much about the cross or the atonement or the work of the Holy Spirit in his work. Still, "The Greatest Thing in the World" is a classic, and no less an evangelical than D. L. Moody, who heard Drummond give this talk in America the following year, said he had never listened to "anything so beautiful."

Drummond was right in at least one thing. In terms of the Christian virtues, love is preeminent; and if it is truly felt and practiced, the other requirements will follow. After all, even Jesus said that love of God and neighbor sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:34-40).

Drummond wrote:

Take any of the commandments. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." If a man love God, you will not have to tell him that. Love is the

fulfilling of that law. "Take not his name in vain." Would he ever dream of taking his name in vain if he loved him? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Would he not be too glad to have one day in seven to dedicate more exclusively to the object of his affection? Love would fulfill all these laws regarding God. And so, if he loved man, you would never think of telling him to honor his father and mother. He could not do anything else. It would be preposterous to tell him not to kill. You could only insult him if you suggested that he should not steal—how could he steal from those he loved? It would be superfluous to beg him not to bear false witness against his neighbor. If he loved him, it would be the last thing he would do. And you would never dream of urging him not to covet what his neighbors had. He would rather they possessed it than himself. In this way, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." It is the rule for fulfilling all rules, the new commandment for keeping all the old commandments, Christ's one secret of the Christian life.

At the end of this essay Drummond said that, as he looked back over his life and all the beautiful things he had seen and enjoyed, he was convinced that it was only the small, seemingly insignificant acts of the love of one individual for another that will last forever.

The Nature of Love

But we must not get overly sentimental at this point, since love is not some mushy emotion that embraces all, forgives all, forgets all, and requires nothing. The danger of an essay like Henry Drummond's is that it encourages just those sentiments. The Bible never does. In fact, you will notice at once that in our text Paul does not even define love. He passes immediately to how love functions. It is the same in 1 Corinthians 13. Chapter 13 seems to be defining love, but it does so only in the sense that it tells us what love does and does not do.

Romans 12:9 states two specific things about love. First, true love is genuine. "Love must be sincere," says the author. Second, love must be discriminating. "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good," is how Paul puts it. In the Greek text *hate* and *cling* are participles, meaning hating and clinging. So it is clear that they are linked to the former statement

and describe how love is to operate, rather than being independent statements or commands.

1. *Love is genuine.* The New International Version translates the first half of verse 9 as "Love must be sincere." *Sincere* is an English word based on the Latin words *sine cera,* meaning without wax, and it refers to the ancient practice of using wax to hide cracks in inferior pottery so the vessel could be sold for a higher price than it could be otherwise. Quality ware was stamped *sine cera* ("without wax") to show that it had not been doctored. In regard to people, this says that a sincere person is one who is not hiding his true nature by hypocritical words or actions.

In the Greek text the word translated *sincere* is *anupokritos,* the latter part of which has given us the word *hypocritical,* which I have used to describe speech that is insincere. *Anupokritos* means without a mask, and it refers to the way in which, in the Greek theater, actors would carry tragic, comic, or melodramatic masks to signal the role they were playing. When Paul tells us that love is to be *an* ("not") hypocritical, he is saying that those who love are not to play a role but rather are to be genuine. In other words, we are to get off the stage and drop our masks.

But that is not easy. John Calvin remarks in his treatment of Romans 12:9 that "it is difficult to express how ingenious almost all men are in counterfeiting a love which they do not really possess. They deceive not only others, but also themselves, while they persuade themselves that they have a true love for those whom they not only treat with neglect, but also in fact reject."

It may help us to realize that the love that is commended here is the love of God that is shown to fallen creatures through the death of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and which is developed in Christians by the Holy Spirit. In all, there are four Greek words that may be translated *love:* *storgê*, which refers to family affection; *philia*, which denotes love between friends; *eros,* which is sexual love; and *agapê*, which is God-love and is therefore pure, holy, unvarying, and unfeigned. It is the latter word that is used in verse 9. This love is sincere by definition,

since God is utterly unvarying and unfeigned. It is this true, Godlike love that we are to have for other people.

If we are new creatures in Christ, then we must love without hypocrisy, since this is the very nature of the love that has been placed within us by the Father. We must be *sine cera*.

2. *Love is discriminating.* For some people it may come as a shock to discover the word *hate* immediately after the words *love must be sincere.* First, love; then hate! The two seem incompatible to most of us. But they are not, and their juxtaposition in this verse teaches an important truth; love must be discriminating. Real love does not love everything. On the contrary, it hates what is evil and clings to what is good.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8). That is one of the most sublime statements in the Bible, but God is not only love. He is also hate in the sense that he hates what is evil with a proper, righteous hatred. Proverbs 6:16-19 tells us seven things that God hates: "haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." Isaiah 1:12-15 tells us that God hates religion that is merely formal:

> When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?
> Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
> Your incense is detestable to me.
> New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
> Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.
> They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.
> When you spread out your hands in prayer,
> I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.

In Amos 5:21 God says, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies." The reason, of course, is that these merely formal observances are hypocritical, and love is not hypocritical.

Therefore, if we love as God loves—and we must if we are Christians—then there will be things for us to hate, just as there will also be things we must love. We will hate the violence done to people by whatever name—nationalism, ethnic cleansing, racial or religious pride, war, keeping the peace, even "necessity." But we will love the humble and those who work for peace, yes, and even those who are guilty of the violence, because we will want to turn them from their ways. We will hate lying, especially by those who are in important positions—CEOs and other heads of corporations, political figures, presidents, and even ministers. We will hate what their lies do to others. Yet we will love the truth and will at the same time also love those who are lying, for we will see them as people who need the Savior.

That is what love does. Love *hates* evil—an intentionally strong word. But love also clings to what is good. The Greek word rendered *cling* in some of its forms means to glue. So the idea is that true love will bond us to the good. We will stick to it like epoxy.

The Greatest of These

We can hardly discuss what love is like, even on the basis of these two powerful terms—hating evil and loving good—without also turning to what Paul says about love in 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices

with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

It should be evident to anyone that the most important paragraph of this chapter is the second. The first tells us how important love is. The third says that love will endure even when things like prophecies, tongues, and the quest for knowledge have ceased. The final paragraph says that love is more important even than such enduring things as faith and hope. But it is the second paragraph that lists love's wonderful qualities and functions. There are fifteen statements in all.

1. *Love is patient.* Drummond says that this is "the normal attitude of love." This is because people are difficult, exasperating, and slow. Love understands this and so waits patiently. It knows that God is patient and that he has been wonderfully patient with us.
2. *Love is kind.* The world is filled with hurting, suffering people. Love knows this and does what it can to help, uplift, serve, encourage, and otherwise embrace them in their misery. It is quick to speak an encouraging word, quick to offer everyone a willing, outstretched hand.
3. *Love does not envy.* The first two descriptions of love have been positive. Here is the first of eight negative statements, saying what love is *not* and does *not* do. Love is not jealous. It is glad when other people win honors, achieve fame, strike it rich, and are

praised. This is because love knows God and is content with the life God has given. Only a believer can be truly happy when others are preferred before himself.

4. *Love does not boast.* The world is filled with boasters, people who in one way or another are calling attention to who they are, how important they are, and how much they have achieved. Love does not do this, because love does not think highly of itself and because it is glad when others are exalted. A wise man once said, "There is no limit to what a man can achieve if he is not worried about who gets the credit." This is love.

5. *Love is not proud.* The opposite of pride is humility, and love is humble. Love does not have inflated ideas of itself. Love is gracious.

6. *Love is not rude.* The opposite of rudeness is courtesy, and love has good manners. It thinks of others. It holds its tongue and waits for others to speak. Love listens. Love does not dominate a social setting and will not blurt out things that wound another person.

7. *Love is not self-seeking.* The world looks at something and asks, "What's in it for me?" Love does not seek for self, because it is not thinking of self. Love thinks of the one it loves. Jesus did not seek his own advantage when he came to earth to save us. Rather, he "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,... he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8).

8. *Love is not easily angered.* "For embittering life, for breaking up communities, for destroying the most sacred relationships, for devastating homes, for withering up men and women, for taking the bloom off childhood; in short, for sheer gratuitous misery-producing power, [anger] stands alone," says Henry Drummond. But love is not easily angered. It does not have a short fuse. It is not irritable, not easily provoked. It is not touchy. Love is patient and kind.

9. *Love keeps no record of wrongs.* Some people have a knack for bringing up mistakes we have made and wounds we have inflicted even decades afterwards. Love forgets these wrongs. It does not compile statistics. It is not resentful. It is not vindictive.

10. *Love does not delight in evil.* Love is not amused by wrongdoing. It is not attracted by vice. It does not find trash intriguing, even when it is dressed up for prime time television or published in glossy magazines. Dishonest schemes do not please it. Love hates wickedness.

11. *Love rejoices with the truth.* This is the other half of the only two-part description in this paragraph. It shows that the evil Paul is thinking of when he says "does not delight in evil" is chiefly the evil that tells lies. Love loves truth, above all the truth that is God's. Love loves the Bible. It delights to speak about it.

12. *Love always protects.* The last four descriptions say what love *always* does. First, it always protects the other person. It sides with the weak. It rallies around the one who has been oppressed, attacked, abused, hurt, slandered, or otherwise made a victim. Love protects children, because it knows that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14).

13. *Love always trusts.* Love is never suspicious. Love is not trying to see under the surface or pry out the hidden motives of another. Love is not stupid or gullible, but it always thinks the best. It is the quality that brings out the best in other people. A mother shows love when she tells her struggling son that she believes in him, or her discouraged daughter that she knows she will do well.

14. *Love always hopes.* Love does not stop loving because it is not loved in return or because it is deceived. Love hopes for the best, and it forgives not once or even seven times, but seventy times seven. Love is not even counting.

15. *Love always perseveres.* Love never gives up. It is unconquerable, indomitable. Love can outlast hate and evil and indifference. Love

can outlast anything. Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, "It is... the one thing that stands after all else has fallen."

Because He First Loved Us

We live in a skeptical world, and it would be safe to say that there are not many worldly people who believe in a love like this. They may wish for it, wanting to be loved in this way. But most would say with some bitterness that to hope for true love in this world is a delusion.

What a pity this is! Because exactly this love has come into our world in the person of Jesus Christ, and love is to be shown by those who are his disciples. In 1 John 4, the disciple who leaned on Christ's bosom at the Last Supper tells us that "God is love" (v. 8). He follows it up by saying that the exhibition of God's love is in the death of Jesus for our sins. "No one has ever seen God," he says. But then, "If we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (v. 12). In other words, the world cannot see God, but they can see him in the way Christians love each other.

In ancient times the pagans marvelled at such love. "Behold how these Christians love one another!" they cried. Do you love like that? Remember that this is where the apostle Paul *begins* the list of Christian virtues.

Chapter 194.
Love in Action

Romans 12:10-13

I pointed out in the last study that although the various exhortations of Romans 12:9-13 seem in most translations merely to be strung together in no specific order and with no apparent relationship to one another, in the Greek they are arranged quite carefully. To begin with, they fall into two separate portions: verse 9, which introduces the subject of love in a general way, and verses 10-13, which show how genuine love is to

function. We saw that the Greek words for *hate* and *cling* in verse 9 are actually participles linked to the words "love must be sincere." So the sentence actually reads, "Love must be sincere, hating what is evil and clinging to what is good." This tells us that the love Paul is talking about is no mere sentimental mush but rather is concerned for what is good. It is both genuine and discriminating. In the next verses, after describing this love generally, Paul shows how it is to operate in nine areas.

That is the second important fact about this arrangement. In the Greek text these are nine nouns in the dative case, each of which comes first in its clause for emphasis. We usually translate a dative with the word *to*, as in "to the store" or "to church." But in this case the meaning is something like "as regards" or "with respect to." John Murray does not stick to the nine items specifically, but he provides a translation of verses 10-13 that gives a good idea how this goes: *"In brotherly love* being kindly affectioned to one another, *in honor* preferring one another, *in zeal* not flagging, *in spirit* fervent, serving the Lord, *in hope* rejoicing, *in affliction* being patient, *in prayer* continuing instant, *in the needs of the saints* partaking, hospitality pursuing." This is how the love introduced in verse 9 is to function.

Kindness to One Another

The first thing Paul writes about is being kind to one another. Our translation says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." I pointed out in the last study that in the Greek language there are four words for love: *agapê*, *philia*, *storgê*, and *eros*. The last word refers to sexual love and does not occur in the New Testament, no doubt because this kind of love had become so debased among the heathen. The first word, *agapê*, is the great New Testament word for God's love and for the love of Christians for God and one another. It is the word used in verse 9. The remaining two words, *philia* and *storgê*, are in this verse, which means that all three of the New Testament's words for love are in verses 9 and 10.

But they occur in combinations. In the Greek text the first words of Paul's command are "in brotherly love." That is *Philadelphia* in Greek, the word for *love* being combined with the word for *brother.* The second combination is the Greek word *philostorgoi,* rendered *devoted* in the New International Version. These words mean that "in respect to the love of our Christian brothers and sisters, we are to be marked by a devotion that is characteristic of a loving, closeknit, and mutually supportive family."

The King James Version reads, "Be *kindly affectionate* to one another with brotherly love." *Kindly* is based on the word *kin,* meaning *family.* So again, we are being told that we are to love and treat Christians as we would members of our family.

Christians are our family, of course, regardless of their background, race, nationality, occupation, wealth, or education—or even whether we are attracted to or like another believer. That is irrelevant. The first verse of "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" goes like this:

> Blessed be the tie that binds
> Our hearts in Christian love;
> The fellowship of kindred minds
> Is like to that above.

"Kindred minds" means the minds of those who are spiritual kin—members of God's new family on earth. So our devotion to one another is not to be a matter of liking but of life. The contemporary church will never have the power of the early church until today's Christians love one another as a close-knit family.

Preferring One Another

The second of Paul's datives is about honor and is closely related to what has just been said. A literal translation might be, "And in respect to honor, lead the way for each another." In other words, "Don't wait around for people to recognize your contributions and praise you. Instead, be alert to what they are contributing and honor them."

Unfortunately, if we look at today's church, we must conclude that the exact opposite is more often the case. Instead of thinking about and appreciating other Christians and what they are doing, our minds are usually on ourselves, and we are resentful that we are not sufficiently recognized or appreciated. Therefore we are jealous of other Christians. Great harm has been done by such jealousy. Ministries have been seriously weakened. Churches have been split. Valuable causes have been set back for generations and sometimes for good. Paul must have seen this as a potential danger for the church at Philippi, for he wrote to those believers: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).

This is how true love functions. It gets to the front of the line not to receive its own honors, but to show honor and respect for other people.

Never Flagging in Zeal

Verse 11 contains three statements about true love, beginning with a negative: "Never be lacking in zeal." A more literal rendering, highlighting the dative construction, would be: "In regard to what you ought to be doing, don't be lazy." This is directed against weariness in well-doing (Gal. 6:9), and it is a real problem when trying to live the Christian life for any length of time. It is easy to get discouraged. It is hard to keep on steadily.

At this point the King James Version says, "Not slothful in business." To most people *business* suggests commercial dealings only, which is why newer versions drop that word. But it is helpful to think of it in this way.

1. *The business of being a Christian.* It is a puzzle to me how anyone can take on the most important business of all, the business of being a follower of Jesus Christ, and do it in a passive, apathetic, part-time, or slovenly manner. Yet many do. What we should do is follow after Jesus Christ with all our hearts and minds and with all

the energy at our disposal. We should work at being Christians. Robert Candlish writes about this wisely: "Your sanctification must be made a matter of business. It must be cared for and prosecuted in a business-like way; not indolently and slothfully, as if it were a process that might be left to itself, but industriously, sedulously, diligently, with regularity and punctuality, as you would manage a worldly concern, on the common principles of worldly energy and worldly care and worldly zeal."

2. *The business of being a Christian father or mother.* Raising a family takes work, and Christian love demands that this too be done steadily and without being lazy. Children will not raise themselves in godliness. Left to themselves they will grow up like an untended garden, full of weeds and other wild things. It takes work to raise children well.

3. *Church business.* I am always surprised how church leaders will so often conduct the work of the church in a slipshod manner, doing whatever needs to be done to just get by, when they would never think of conducting their own business in that way or running their own home on such principles. The work of the church, including how we manage the building, should be done in the best possible way we know how. After all, if it is done well, the church will remain as a place for worship and work long after we are gone and our businesses and homes have passed to other hands.

We should be diligent in our spiritual battles too. Candlish says, "If you would fight for Christ, you must fight deliberately, with [a] cool head as well as [a] warm heart; with fixed and resolute determination, upon principle rather than upon impulse. If you would work for Christ, you must work systematically, and you must work on with patient and persevering energy, with firm purpose not to give up or to give in."

4. *The business of earning a living.* I said earlier that the word *business* in verse 11 (KJV) does not refer to commercial enterprises, but to everything we should be doing. On the other hand, it does not exclude the ways in which we make our livings

but rather embraces them. Christians should excel in how they work. Paul told the Colossians, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:23-24). The last sentence means that love for Christ should prod us to work both well and hard in everything.

Fervent in Spirit

The word *fervor* (NIV) or *fervent* (KJV) is from a verb meaning to boil. So a literal translation of this phrase would be: "In respect to the spirit (or Spirit), boiling." Unfortunately, since boiling suggests heat and we think of heat as having to do with anger, it would be better to think of this as a Christian "bubbling over" or even, as the Revised Standard Version has it, "being aglow with the Spirit."

This probably refers not to the Holy Spirit, but to a personality that radiates the presence of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, this does not happen apart from the Holy Spirit, and in this sense the translation *Spirit* is not wrong. Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, "The glow of the Spirit is the warmth of the soul touched by the love of Christ. It cannot exist apart from the knowledge that we have been loved, that Christ gave himself for our sins, that we have been redeemed, and that the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in our hearts. Such knowledge causes us to yield in full surrender to him as Lord of all. The Holy Spirit, who dwells in all believers, will glow through those who allow him to fill and direct their lives."

Serving the Lord

"Serving the Lord" has probably been added to "keep your spiritual fervor" to show that the
"glow" of the Spirit is not without direction but is instead focused on the work and cause of Christ. Still, this is another dative construction that sets it apart as a separate item. Literally it reads, "As regards the Lord, serving." We remember how Jesus once asked, "Why do you call

me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46), meaning that if he is our Lord, we must obey and serve him. We will do no less if we truly love him. Moreover, the way we will show we love other people is by serving them. Even Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

Rejoicing in Hope

Verse 12 introduces three more items, which also go together. It might be paraphrased, "In so far as we have cause to hope, let us be joyful; in so far as we have cause of pain, let us hold out; in so far as the door of prayer is open to us, let us continue to use it."

In the Bible hope always has to do with what God has promised but that we have not seen or received yet. In particular it refers to that "blessed hope," which is "the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13) and to the fact that when he appears "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The fact that we do not see this yet is important, for it means that as Christians we will have our eyes fixed on invisible, spiritual things, like Abraham, who did not set his affection on the things of this life but who "was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

More than anything else, this is what sets Christians apart from those about us who are merely secular. Others have their horizons bounded by what is seen. Like Carl Sagan, for them "the cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." The horizons of Christians are not cut off like this. They are wider even than the universe, for Christians look to God, hope in God, and look forward expectantly to an eternity with him.

And what a difference this makes in daily life. Robert Haldane says, "The hope of the glory of God, in which the apostle here affirms that Christians ought to rejoice, is provided as an important part of the believer's armor—a helmet to cover his head to defend him against the attacks of spiritual enemies (1 Thess. 5:8). It supports him when [he is] ready to be cast down.... It soothes the bitterness of affliction when the

believer is resting on the promises of God. In prosperity it elevates his affections, and fixing his expectation of the glory that shall be revealed, disengages him from the love of this world.... It comforts him in the prospect of death."

Patient in Affliction

While waiting for the glory that is still to be revealed the Christian sometimes suffers persecution or affliction. Therefore, Paul adds that "in respect to affliction" the one who trusts God should be "patient"—not just resigned in a fatalistic, stoic sense, accepting what cannot be changed, but waiting confidently for God's own resolution of the problem, knowing that he will reward the good and punish evil in his own time.

Meanwhile, we should not to be overly confident that we are among the good or that our actions, especially those that are criticized, are without any evil motives or are beyond reproach. Rather, we must be careful to "make [our] calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10) and examine ourselves to see whether we truly love Jesus Christ and are serving him or are merely pursuing our own interests.

In Prayer Continuing Faithful

A literal translation of this verse might be "and in regard to prayer, continuing." *Continuing* is an interesting word to use. We might have expected any one of a number of other words. But Paul says *continuing* because he was aware that this is just the problem. It is not that we never pray. We almost have to, if we are Christians. But we get tired of praying, our minds wander, and we neglect prayer precisely when we most need it.

Our Lord was aware of this too, which is why he said so much about prayer. If you go through the gospels and study what he said, you will find that in nearly all instances the bottom line of his teaching was simply that we should pray—not that we should be paragons of prayer, or eloquent in prayer, or even that we pray on until we get what we

desire, though that is sometimes implied—simply that we should pray. He said this because we don't, at least not when we most need to.

Do you remember Jesus' teaching about prayer in Luke 11? After he had given the Lord's Prayer, Jesus told about a man who knocked on a neighbor's door late at night because a friend had come and he had nothing to give him, and although the neighbor did not want to get out of bed to help, eventually he did because of the man's persistence. Jesus also told about human fathers who willingly give their children food when they ask for it, not substituting a snake for a fish or a scorpion for an egg. Those stories were meant to illustrate our need on the one hand, and God's willingness to meet that need on the other.

Then Jesus said, "So... *ask* and it will be given to you; *seek* and you will find; *knock* and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). In other words, "Pray." Just pray! The only reasons we might fail to pray are that: (1) we do not think we need God's help, thinking that we are adequate of ourselves, or (2) we do not believe God really is a loving heavenly father. Why else would we not pray or even be in prayer continually?

Participating in the Need of the Saints

The last of Paul's nine datives is a compound phrase that fills all of verse 13. In our translation it appears as two distinct ideas: (1) "Share with God's people who are in need" and (2) "Practice hospitality." But the Greek text actually combines the ideas, saying, "In regard to the need of the saints, participating, practicing hospitality."

This means that Paul is not just talking about giving money to poor Christians. In fact, he is not thinking about money specifically at all. He is thinking about the needs of Christians and about identifying with them in those needs. If a person is mourning, we should identify with him in his sorrow and give what comfort we can. If another is lonely or abandoned, we should be company for her to the degree we are able. We should give to the financial needs of impoverished people, too. Jesus made such things a test of whether a person is truly a Christian,

saying in Matthew 25, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matt. 25:34-36). Those who had not done that were sent away "to eternal punishment" (v. 46).

I do not know how anything can be more practical than this. To love one another, to honor one another, to serve one another, to pray for one another, and to meet one another's needs is the very heart of applied Christianity.

Chapter 195.
The Christian and His Enemies

Romans 12:14-16

My good friend Michael Scott Horton has written a book called *Made in America*, in which he examines the impact of American culture on Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity. The impact comes from a variety of cultural sources, he says, but one of these is our consumerism. In America everything is sold—from toothpaste to politicians—and the way it is sold is by appealing to the dreams and desires of the people. Nothing bad is ever faced. Disappointments are ruled out. This has its effect on Christianity. In order to sell Christianity — and selling it is big business today—anything unpleasant or demanding is suppressed, and the gospel is commended rather as a cure for failure and low self-esteem, as well as the path to power.

"In consumer religion, Christianity becomes trivialized. Its great mysteries become cheap slogans. Its majestic hymns are traded in for shallow jingles.... And its parishioners, now unashamedly called audiences, have come to expect dazzling testimonies, happy anecdotes,

and fail-proof schemes for successful living that will satiate spiritual consumption," he says.

How different is biblical Christianity! In the Gospels Jesus spoke often of the cost of following after him in faithful discipleship, without which there is no salvation and no Christianity. What is more—and here the situation becomes even more impossible for today's marketers of religion— he warned that those who identify with him would be hated. Instead of being popular and successful, Christians would be hated and rejected, as he was.

What a way to "sell" Christianity!

A Radical Ethic

But we must be truthful as God is truthful. Therefore, we must not pretend that the followers of Jesus will always have a smooth path in which to walk or be carried to the skies on "flowery beds of ease."

In Romans 12, Paul has been discussing the application of theology to daily life. He has said that the underlying principle is that Christians are to cease thinking as the world thinks and begin to think as Christians—a radical proposal. First, we are to think of ourselves with sober judgment. Next, we are to see others in the church as members of Christ's body.

But now we come upon an even more radical proposal—we are to love our enemies. Paul says that instead of hating those who hate us, we are to love them and pray for them, even as Christ loved us and prayed for us. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse," is his instruction.

Christians Will Be Persecuted

Paul's words come directly from Jesus' teaching, of course: first, the certainty of persecution; then, the way we should respond to it.

All through his ministry Jesus alluded to the fact that the world would hate and persecute his followers. But in the last discourses, recorded in

John's gospel, Jesus became explicit in these predictions:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: "No servant is greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me....

All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.

John 15:18-21; 16:1-

These words predict the world's hatred of Christ's followers and explain why the world will hate Christians. There are three reasons:

1. *Christians "do not belong to the world."* There is a natural but sinful tendency among people to dislike those who are different from them. This explains much racial hatred as well as the dislike people of one ethnic background frequently feel for people of another or why people feel uneasy when visiting the sick or dying. This can be quite trivial, or it can have stronger motivations. In his *Daily Study Bible* on John, William Barclay tells how Jonas Hanway, the man who invented the umbrella, was persecuted. When he tried to introduce his idea into England, where the umbrella should have been welcomed as a wonderful gift from a rainy heaven, Hanway was pelted with dirt and stones. Barclay also mentions the great Aristides of Athens, an outstanding leader who was called "Aristides the Just." He was banished by the citizens of Athens. Afterward, when one of the people was asked why he had voted to banish so outstanding

a leader, the man replied only, "It was because I am tired of hearing him always called 'the Just.'

"

The world's people like those who are like themselves. Anyone who does not conform to the pattern, who is different, will meet trouble. But if that is so of people who are basically the world's type anyway, how much more true must it be of those who have been lifted out of the world and its way of thinking by Jesus Christ. The Bible calls them "a new creation" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). They are truly different. So the world hates them and tries to persecute them, sometimes in the open, sometimes in subtle ways.

2. *Christians have been "chosen... out of the world."* There is probably no doctrine of the

Christian faith that is more hated by the world than the doctrine of election. People hated it when

Jesus first taught it, so much so that on one occasion they responded by trying to kill him (Luke 4:24-29). People hate it just as much today. They hate it even if they just suspect we believe it, even when we do not teach it openly.

3. *Christians are identified with Christ.* The third reason why the world hates and persecutes Christians is the chief reason and the one Jesus stresses most in John's gospel—because believers are identified with Christ. Moreover, since Jesus is God and since unbelievers hate God—they would murder him if they could get their hands on him—their hatred for God, whom they cannot reach, is vented against Christians. To put it in other words, the world does not hate Christians because of what they are in themselves. In ourselves we are nothing. The world hates Christians because it hates Christ and because we are followers of Christ and stand for his cause against the standards of the world.

"Bless and Do Not Curse"

The fact of persecution is well established. If we are Christ's and if we stand for Christ against the world, we will experience it. But now the question is this: How are we to respond to persecution? In Romans 12:14 Paul tells us that we are to bless our persecutors. We are to "bless" and "not curse." Again, this is a conscious reflection of Jesus' common teaching.

Jesus' best-known teaching on this subject is from the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon, uttered near the beginning of his ministry, the Lord spoke of those who will persecute Christians, saying:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:43-48

We will never be able to do what Christ is saying (and Paul is repeating in Romans) unless we understand two things. First, it is natural to strike back at people who are hurting us. It is natural to wish them harm, to "curse" them, to use Paul's word. Moreover, there will be more persecution, and thus a greater danger of cursing, the more pronounced is our Christianity. The more we stand out for Christ, the more we will be persecuted and the greater the danger of our wanting to strike back at our tormentors.

Robert S. Candlish, devotes several pages in his study of Romans 12 to this problem, pointing out that if our Christianity is lukewarm, if we seldom openly identify with Christ's cause, the danger of persecution and the resulting temptation to retaliate will be slight. But if we stand for Christ, for righteousness, and are persecuted, what then? "Can flesh and blood stand it?" he asks. "Can you abstain in your hearts from

venting what is but too near akin to a malediction or a curse? Can you help yourselves from partly giving way to what may seem fully justifiable emotions of personal resentment and a personal sense of unprovoked and undeserved wrong?" "No!" he answers. "Not unless you make conscience of blessing those whom you are thus tempted to curse."

And that is the second thing we need to understand, that the only way to overcome our natural tendency to fight back is to work for our persecutors' good. That is, we have to bless and not curse.

The word *bless* has different meanings. When we bless God we ascribe to him the praise that is his due. When God blesses us he bestows blessing upon us. When we bless others we ask God to bless them. It is in this sense that we are told to bless and not curse. We are to pray for our enemies, asking God to bless them. But, then, if we are asking God to do good to them, it is patently clear that we must also seek every honest means of doing good to them too.

This brings us back to Jesus' teaching. Toward the beginning of his ministry, in the Sermon on the Mount, he uttered what we know as the Golden Rule: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12). Many of the world's cultures have it in negative form:
"Do not do anything to another that you would not want them to do to you." This is not surprising. It simply amounts to: "Don't hit someone else unless you want to get hit yourself." Anyone with even the smallest amount of wisdom can see the sense of that.

But that is not what Jesus said. He expressed his "rule" in a positive form, saying that we are to seek out and, as far as possible, effect the good of other people, even our enemies.

We have in Stephen, the first martyr, an example of this principle in action. As Stephen was being stoned to death he prayed for those who were killing him, saying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). His prayer was heard too. We do not know what happened to

everyone who was present at the stoning of Stephen that day, but we do know what happened to one of them. His name was Saul, later known as Paul, the author of this very letter. He was profoundly moved by the way Stephen prayed for his antagonists, and Stephen's death won (or at least pricked the heart of) his tormentor (Acts 26:14).

Saint Augustine once said wisely, "The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen." So let's learn to pray for and bless others.

Robert Candlish says:

When you suffer wrong, call to mind the considerations which should bring the wrongdoer before you in a very different light. Look at his case rather than your own.... If you put yourself in his place, you will see much, very much, that should charm all your resentment away and turn it into tenderest pity and concern.... Ask yourself what, if his history had been yours, you would have been, how you—if his lot were yours, his training, his habits, his companions—would be inclined to think and feel and act. You cease to wonder at his obtuseness and his opposition. You are drawn and not repelled by that too easily accounted for infatuation of his, which really hurts not you, but, alas! is ruining his own benighted soul. No thought of self can find harbor within you. All your thought is of him. Your bowels yearn over him and more for the very blindness and madness which make him a persecutor. And so you bless, and do not curse.

Four Important Characteristics

In verses 15 and 16 Paul lists four characteristics of those who are true Christians. These verses bear the same relationship to verse 14 as verses 10-13 bore to verse 9 in the preceding paragraph. In verse 9 Paul set forth a love that is sincere and discriminating. Then in verses 10-13 he listed nine areas in which that love is to function. In this paragraph he has explained that in regard to our enemies we are to bless and not curse. That is the general statement. Next he lists four areas in which that should be done.

The way they are written, verses 15 and 16 could apply to Christians as well as to enemies. But since they are bracketed by references to those who persecute us, in verse 14 which comes before and verse 17 which comes after, Paul must be thinking of how Christians should relate to unbelievers.

1. *Empathy.* Empathy describes what Paul is talking about when he says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Empathy is the ability to identify closely with someone else, to make his case your own and allow what has happened to him to affect you also.

But this is not easy to do. We often do it superficially. We would not think of joking at a funeral, for example, and we express our condolences to those who suffer loss. Again, when a friend is promoted we send congratulations and may even attend a party in his honor. But when someone does very well we find it hard to be anything but jealous, even when we are congratulating him or her. There is only one way to break out of this. We have to stop thinking of ourselves and our own interests all the time, and the only way we can do that is by a transformation accomplished in us by Jesus Christ. Jesus set the example, of course, since he did not exalt himself but rather took "the very nature of a servant... and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:7-8).

2. *Amicability.* Christians should be easy to get along with. This is what Paul is thinking of when he says that we should "live in harmony with one another." He is not talking about making peace, which is a positive thing. He will deal with that later (in v. 18). He is talking about not making sparks or causing turmoil. If this is still dealing with enemies, as it must be since the verses both before and after speak of them, then he is saying that we should not be like those Christian crusaders who are always looking for a fight or hunting down "Christ's enemies." We are to love and win people, not root them out to beat them senseless.

3. *The common touch.* Christians should "be willing to associate with people of low position" even more than others, because that is what most of us are. God did not choose "many who were wise by human standards," many who were "influential" or "of noble birth." Rather "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

We are to associate with those who seem unimportant even if we have a high position. Jesus did it and was criticized for it (Matt. 11:19). We need to stop thinking of other people as being beneath us and instead come to regard them as people made for everlasting fellowship with God.

4. *Humility.* The last sentence in this paragraph takes us back to where Paul began. He said in verse 3, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment." Right thinking, about both ourselves and others, dominates verse 16, as it did the earlier statement. Can we do it? Leon Morris has a helpful suggestion when he reminds us that "the person who is wise in his own eyes is rarely so in the eyes of other people."

Our Great Example

The trouble with exhortations of this nature, practical as they may be, is that they seem far beyond us and therefore discourage us if we start to take them seriously. They are not discouraging if we do not think deeply, for then we just assume that we are like this. But if we examine ourselves, we will have to admit that we do not pray for God's blessing on our enemies very often, empathize with others, act agreeably, or associate with those the world scorns and be humble. And that is discouraging.

Perhaps what we need to do here is simply get our minds off ourselves entirely and begin to think of Christ. Because if we think of him, we will become increasingly like him, even if we are not especially conscious of it.

Donald Grey Barnhouse writes:

When the nations were raging and the peoples imagining a vain thing, he did not move to destroy them. He did not destroy Adam when he sinned, but promised a Savior and began the long course of history so that man could have opportunity upon opportunity to repent and return to God.... He did not destroy us when we were ungodly sinners. He came from heaven to save us. He came into the camp of his enemies and allowed them to do their will against him in order to establish the foundation for our redemption. When we were without strength, when we were enemies, Christ died for us. Note that he did not save us by demonstrating his mighty power in some miracle. He saved us—He saved us by letting us kill him. How astonishing this is!

And when he rose from the dead he did not judge those who behaved so wickedly against him. The Jerusalem to which he held out his arms before he died was still the center of his loving thought. He commanded his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, but he commanded them to begin at Jerusalem. Was this not heaping coals of fire upon the heads of his enemies? And did it not melt the hearts of many?

It did, of course. It still does. It can through you.

Chapter 196.
Right Living at All Times

Romans 12:17

Not long ago I came across an elaborate poll on the values and conduct of Americans. It appeared as a book called *The Day America Told the Truth,* and it was described as "the most massive in-depth survey of

what Americans really believe that has ever been conducted." The survey was based on a sampling of more than two thousand people in one week, each person answering over eighteen hundred questions, and there were follow-up interviews with thousands more.

A survey of this scope reveals a lot of things, of course. But one of the dominant findings— perhaps the most important of all—is that America no longer has a sense of right and wrong. "A letdown in moral values is now considered the number one problem facing our country," the pollsters wrote. Our political and business leaders have betrayed us. We lie all the time. "Only 13 percent of us believe in all of the Ten Commandments," the book reports. "Forty percent of us believe in five of the Ten Commandments.... There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect. Today there is very little respect for the law —for any kind of law."

The number one rationalization for lawless and immoral behavior is that everyone else is doing it. "If everybody else is doing it, why shouldn't I?" is our argument.

Making the distinction between right and wrong is what civilization—not to mention right religious behavior—is all about. But that is what we have lost in America. We do not believe in right and wrong. Therefore, it is against that serious national problem that we come to Paul's challenge to Christians in Romans 12:17, where we read, "Be careful to do what is *right* in the eyes of everybody."

All Things Right and Beautiful

The verse has two parts: (1) "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" and (2) "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody." The first part is the negative version of the Golden Rule ("Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse"). The second part is where Paul gets into the need for right conduct.

The King James Version of this verse seems to say something very different. It says, "Provide things honest in the sight of all men," which

sounds like a command to support your family, to see that they have food to eat and a place to live, to pay the children's college tuition. That is not what the KJV translators meant, but the problem arises from the fact that the key word in this verse has several meanings. The word is *kalos*, which one Greek dictionary defines as good, right, proper, fitting, better, honorable, honest, fine, beautiful, or precious. The earlier translation selected the word *honest.* The New International Version uses the word *right.*

This does not mean that either translation is mistaken, however. It is just a case of the Greek word being more inclusive than any one of our many English terms.

The way to understand *kalos* is to know that it was the word used by the Greek philosophers, especially Plato, to describe the goal of sound thinking. Usually we think of this goal as "the good," which Plato proposed as the right pursuit of all rational beings. But if we are working in the area of aesthetics, the "good" that we are pursuing becomes "the beautiful." In philosophy it is "the truth." If we are thinking of morals, it is what is "right." If we are thinking of character, it is what is "honorable."

The point is that this is what all people should aim at. So when Paul told the Romans that they were to "be careful to do what is *right* in the eyes of everybody," he was saying that Christians are to lead the way in good or right things, and they are to do this always. We are to be known as those who always pursue the very best in all areas.

Leon Morris puts it in other terms. He says that Paul "is calling on them to live out the implications of the gospel. Their lives are to be lived on such a high plane that even the heathen will recognize the fact. They will always be living in the sight of non-Christians, and the way they live should be such as to commend the essential Christian message."

The Need for Ethics

It is evident that if we are to pursue what is good, true, right, honest, or beautiful in life, there must be something good, true, right, honest, or beautiful to pursue. And this means that there must be absolutes. Otherwise, we would be looking for something that is not there, and looking for something that does not exist is insanity. This is exactly the problem, of course, and it is why America is experiencing its present "values vacuum" or "morals morass," as *Time* magazine reported several years ago. In other words, our problem is relativism.

This is what Allan Bloom expressed so powerfully in *The Closing of the American Mind,* an expose of the failure of American higher education during the seventies and eighties. Bloom is a Platonist, or at least he shares the educational goals of the Greek philosophers. He wants to pursue the "good." He thinks that is what higher education is all about. But today, he says, people no longer believe that there is a higher, absolute truth or good to be discovered, especially in education, and as a result the whole educational enterprise is in chaos.

In order to pursue a goal, there must be a goal. To have a strong moral society, we must have moral absolutes. Otherwise, all we can have is what is pragmatic or expedient, which is what education, politics, and American life as a whole have come to. It is why we do not have any heroes today and why we do not have any moral leadership in this country.

A generation or two ago there were heroes, people like Charles Lindbergh, Babe Ruth, Henry Ford, Douglas MacArthur, George Washington Carver, and many others. Today's heroes are celebrities—people like Michael Jordan and Madonna. Why are there no heroes? *The Day America Told the Truth* says, "There are no heroes because we have ceased to believe in anything strongly enough to be impressed by its attainment."

We are not getting leadership from our elected officials, either. We do not even trust them to be honest. In *The Day America Told the Truth* there is this sad anecdote. In 1987 a university president was teaching an adult Sunday school class in his local church. It included bankers,

business executives, and college professors. He asked this question, based on a recent news event: "We hear on the news that an Iranian ship has been sunk in the Persian Gulf. The Iranian government says that it was sunk by American torpedoes. The U.S. government says that the ship hit Iranian mines. Whom do you believe?" The class was silent. No one answered. Everyone wanted more information before deciding what they thought had happened. Not one person in the class trusted his own government enough to believe it would be telling the truth.

We need to have our national morality renewed. But, of course, this cannot happen if the only thing we can say about values is that they are relative. This is what Charles Colson told the Harvard Business School when he was invited to address it as part of Harvard's Distinguished Lecturer series. He told them they could not teach ethics because ethics requires absolutes but the philosophical basis of American higher education, including education at Harvard, is relativism. He distinguished between "ethics" and "morals." Here is what he told them: "The word 'ethics' derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which literally means 'stall'—a hiding place. It was the one place you could go and find security. There could be rest and something that you could depend on; it was unmovable. 'Morals' derives from the word *mores*, which means 'always changing.' Ethics or *ethos* is the normative, what *ought* to be. Morals is what *is*. Unfortunately, in American life today we are totally guided by moral determinations. So, we're not even looking at ethical standards." He argued that in order to have ethics a nation must have access to a set of absolute values, or at least believe they can be found.

But the only place those values can be found is in the biblical revelation, which is why the Judeo-Christian value system has served so well and for so long as the soul of Western civilization. It is also why we need it again today, and so desperately.

Do the "Right" Thing

Several years ago a movie came out called *Do the Right Thing*. This is good advice, even if our culture is unable to tell us what the right thing

is. The Bible tells us we need to do what is right in several areas.

1. *Handling money.* In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul writes about the way he was handling a large sum of money given by the Gentile churches for the poor Christians of Jerusalem. There had been a famine in Judea. Many were starving, and the Gentiles had given money for these poor people. In these chapters Paul explains that he was committing the money to a group of men appointed by the various churches so there would be accountability and no questions about any mishandling of the funds. He explains his reasoning in verses 20-21, using the word *kalos,* the word found in Romans 12:17: "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right [*kalos*], not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Cor. 8:20-21).

The church has suffered scandals over money. Jim Bakker went to jail because of money, and he is only the most visible and recent of many prominent religious figures who have mishandled their supporters' funds. If we are to be "careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody," we must begin here. We should be utterly honest and entirely above board in how we handle money.

That is why at Tenth Presbyterian Church we have our books audited and why the Bible Study Hour does the same thing as well as holding membership in the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

2. *Fair treatment of those who work for you.* In Colossians Paul writes to those who own slaves, saying, "Masters, provide your slaves with what is *right* and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1). The word that is translated *right* in this verse is not the same word as in Romans 12:17. In this verse the word is *dikaios,* from which we get the Greek word for *righteousness* (*dikaiosunê*). It means conforming to a standard, right, proper, fair, honest, innocent. It is a different word, but it means the same or nearly the same thing, and it would be fair to

say that *dikaios* is a near biblical equivalent of the secular philosophical Greek term *kalos*.

This means that we should treat those who work for us fairly, not using them only for what we can get out of them or always trying to get the highest profit at the lowest cost, at their expense.

It means that Christians should lead the way in fair labor relations and work always for the good of their employees.

Wayne Alderson is one person who has shown how this can be done. He was a coal miner's son who pioneered constructive rather than antagonistic labor-management relations in a steel foundry in western Pennsylvania known as Pitron. When he entered the plant, Pitron was in the throes of a ruinous and potentially explosive strike. But Alderson identified with the workers, respected them, and treated them fairly, and as a result he soon turned the plant into one of the nation's most productive and profitable operations. He now heads an organization known as Value of the Person, which is trying to apply biblical principles to labor-management relations nationwide.

3. *Respect of one's parents.* One sad part of the loss of values in America surveyed in *The Day America Told the Truth* is a breakdown in filial piety, more than half of all Americans admitting that they do not plan to take care of their parents in their old age. Nor do the parents expect to be taken care of. The Bible's standard is quite different. The fifth of the Ten Commandments says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12), and Paul wrote thoughtfully, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right [*dikaios*]" (Eph. 6:1).

4. *The pursuit of all good things.* A list of this kind might go on indefinitely since right conduct needs to be a part of everything we think, say, and do. But I have been restricting myself to verses in which the word *right* actually occurs in the NIV. Here is a final one that I have put last only because it comes close to embracing nearly everything else: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right [*dikaios*], whatever is pure,

whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8).

We live in a sinful, evil, perverted culture. It is hard not to be sullied by it. Yet it was no different in Paul's day. The Greek and Roman world of the first century was a slime pit. But in spite of it, Paul says that Christians are to set their minds on good things, things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. We are to seek the best rather than the worst of the world around us.

Just One More Problem

The first problem I discussed is knowing what the "right" thing is so we might do it. I pointed out that it is impossible to know what the right thing is in a relativistic culture like ours. We need absolutes. Above all we need the absolutes that can only come from God. We need the biblical revelation.

But here is the second problem: having the will to do what is right even when we know what it is. I say this because in spite of everything I have said about America's moral decline and the loss of a fixed moral standard for most people, many nevertheless believe they should do what is right, and in some cases they even believe they know what is right. It is just that they do not do it. Even if they want to! Even if they are sure they can!

Above I wrote about Charles Colson and his address on ethics given to the Harvard Business
School in 1991. In that address he recognized both of these problems—first, knowing what is right and, second, having the will to do it—and he illustrated the problems by his own experience. Here is part of his testimony.

I grew up in America during the great Depression and thought that the great goal of life was success, material gain, power and influence. That's why I went into politics. I believed I could gain power and influence how people lived. If I earned a law degree—and I did at night

—and accumulated academic honors and awards, it would enable me to find success, power, fulfillment, and meaning in life.

I had a great respect for the law. When I went through law school, I had a love for the law. I learned the history of jurisprudence and the philosophy underlying it.

I studied Locke, the Enlightenment, and social contract theories as an undergraduate at Brown, and had great respect for the political process. I also had a well-above-average I.Q. and some academic honors. I became very self-righteous.

When I went to the White House, I gave up a law practice that was making almost $200,000 a year (and that was back in 1969, which wasn't bad in those days). It's kind of ordinary now for graduates of Harvard Business School, but then it was a lot of money.... I took a job in the White House at $40,000 a year....

There was one thing about which I was absolutely certain—that no one could corrupt me. *Positive! And* if anybody ever gave me a present at Christmas time, it went right to the driver of my limousine. They used to send in bottles of whiskey, boxes of candy, and all sorts of things. Right to the driver of my automobile. I wouldn't accept a thing.

Patty and I were taken out on someone's boat one day. I discovered it was a chartered boat, and ended up paying for half of if because I didn't want to give the appearance of impropriety.
Imagine me worried about things like that.

I ended up going to prison....

I never once in my life thought I was breaking the law. I would have been *terrified* to do it because I would jeopardize the law degree I had worked four years at night to earn. I had worked my way onto the Law Review, Order of Coif, and Moot Court—all the things that lawyers do — and I graduated in the top of my class. I wouldn't put that in jeopardy for anything in the world!

I was so sure. But, you see, there are two problems. Every human being has an infinite capacity for self-rationalization and self-delusion. You get caught up in a situation where you are absolutely convinced that the fate of the republic rests on the reelection of, in my case, Richard Nixon.... There's an enormous amount of peer pressure, and you don't take time to stop and think,
"Wait a minute. Is this right by some absolute standard or does this seem right in the circumstances? Is it okay?"...

Second, and even more important—and this goes to the heart of the ethical dilemma in America today—even if I had known I was doing wrong, would I have had the *will* to do what is right? It isn't hindsight. I have to tell you the answer is no....

I discovered that there was no restraint on the evil in me. In my self-righteousness I was never more dangerous.

I discovered what Solzhenitsyn wrote so brilliantly from a prison—that the line between good and evil passes not between principalities and powers, but it oscillates within the human heart. Even the most rational approach to ethics is defenseless if there isn't the will to do what is right. On my own—and I can only speak for myself—I do not have that will. That which I want to do, I do not do; that which I do, I do not want to do.

It is only when I can turn to the One whom we celebrate at Easter—the One who was raised from the dead—that I can find the will to do what is right. It's only when that value and that sense of righteousness pervade a society that there can be a moral consensus. I would hope I might leave you, as future business leaders, the thought that society of which we are a part—and for which you should have a great sense of responsibility and stewardship—desperately needs those kind of values. And, if I might say so, each one of us does as well.

Colson was referring to the Apostle Paul when he said, "That which I want to do, I do not do; that which I do, I do not want to do" (see Rom. 7:15). But Colson, like Paul, found that what is impossible for us as

mere human beings becomes possible through the power of Jesus Christ working within. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Paul queried. But he had the answer: "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25).

Chapter 197.
Keeping the Peace

Romans 12:18-20

Whenever the subject of peace comes up Christians tend to get a bad rap, because the people discussing it think immediately of the Crusades of the Middle Ages or Protestants fighting Catholics in Northern Ireland today. We are supposed to be people of peace. Jesus is the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). Yet Christianity seems to go hand in hand with political disruptions, internecine strife, and war.

These associations are not entirely fair. The Crusades were not really Christian. And in any case, they are only examples of the many thousands of wars that have scarred the face of human history. One writer has estimated that in the last four thousand years of human history there have been only three hundred years of peace. Human nature is vindictive, and the fights in which Christians have been involved are merely examples of the innumerable battles that have divided and continue to divide nations, races, families, and people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and dispositions. One of the songs I remember from my college days had this verse:

> The whole world is festering with unhappy souls.
> The French hate the Germans. The Germans hate the Poles.
> Italians hate Yugoslavs. South Africans hate the Dutch.
> And I don't like anybody very much.

Neither United nor Reformed

There is some truth to the complaint that Christians have not always been a peace-loving people.

Wars among nations are seldom in our control. But what about the battles that have divided Christians from Christians? In 1054 the Eastern Orthodox church divided from the Catholic church over one word in the Nicene Creed, *filioque*. It means "and the Son," and it had to do with whether it is right to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds "from the Father *and the Son*" or whether the Holy Spirit proceeds only "from the Father."

The leaders of the Reformation divided over how Jesus was present in the communion service, Martin Luther insisting on a literal physical presence ("This is my body," Matt. 26:26) and Zwingli on a mere remembrance ("Do this in remembrance of me," Luke 22:19).

And what of today? One writer tells of a crossroads in a small town where there were churches on three of the four corners. When a stranger asked what churches they were he was told, "Well, that one is United Presbyterian. This one is Reformed Presbyterian. And this one," pointing to the third, "is for Presbyterians who are neither united nor reformed."

Some divisions are based on important matters of theology and practice, of course. But many are not, and the self-righteous, antagonistic, fighting spirits that lie behind these unnecessary divisions and perpetuate them are a scandal among those who profess to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9). He asserted, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Paul gets to this important matter in Romans 12:18-20, when he says:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

> "If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
> if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
> In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

These are important statements about what it means to be a peacekeeper, especially because this is the first time in the letter that Paul has discussed the subject of peace between human beings. He discussed what it means to have peace with God in the first chapters of the letter (see Rom. 5:1). But this is the first consideration of what it means to be a peacemaker. There are three verses in this section, and they make three important points.

Realism

The first thing we notice about Paul's challenge to Christians to live a life of peace is his sobering realism. He begins, "If it is possible" and "as far as it depends on you..." (v. 18).

This way of speaking recognizes two potential sources of difficulty: (1) the behavior of other people may negate peace and (2) there may be issues at stake that will make peace impossible even from the side of the Christian. For example, truth cannot be bartered away or sacrificed just to maintain peace. Purity cannot be violated. Injustice cannot be condoned. James 3:17 says, "The wisdom that comes from heaven is *first* of all pure, *then* peace-loving...." So a prior, necessary Christian commitment to purity, truth, honesty, justice, and other indispensable matters may make peace unattainable.

Realism recognizes that this is a very wicked world. It knows that evil exists and affirms that it must be resisted by all right-thinking people, sometimes even to the point of armed conflict.

In September 1938 Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich following his much-watched meeting with Adolf Hitler and greeted enthusiastic London crowds with the promise of "peace in our time." He had just signed the infamous four-party agreement giving Germany the right to invade and occupy portions of Czechoslovakia. To maintain peace he had gone against his better judgment and had betrayed an ally. But it was not Chamberlain's motive that was at fault. He was a man of peace who wanted to avoid a threatened bloodbath. What was lacking was his judgment. He was not sufficiently realistic about evil, and World War II was the result.

We also need realism of a positive nature: We should realize that some things contribute to peace just as other things cause conflict and that, if we are Christians, we need to be on the side of the one rather than the other.

Here is some practical realism from the Book of Proverbs:

1. "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers all wrongs" (Prov. 10:12).
2. "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult" (Prov. 12:16).
3. "Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright" (Prov. 14:9).
4. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1).
5. "He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends" (Prov. 17:9).
6. "Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out" (Prov. 17:14).
7. "An angry man stirs up dissension" (Prov. 29:22).

These verses tell us many things we can do to promote or encourage peace even if the other person does not want it.

Forbearance

The second important point Paul has to make about keeping peace is forbearance. He says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (v. 19). This is categorical teaching. It does not say, "Do not avenge yourselves except under the following three or four conditions"

or "except under extreme circumstances." It says, "Do not avenge yourselves." That means never. Fighting back is not Christian.

"But surely I have to stand up for my rights," you say. Do you? If you want to stand up for someone's rights, I'll tell you what to do: Stand up for someone else's rights, fight for them. Do not fight for yourself, at least not if you are serious about obeying God and following Jesus Christ.

This verse tell us something else we should do as well, but it is no more acceptable to our natural way of thinking than what I have just said: Leave room for God's wrath.

In the Greek text of Romans these words are literally, "Give place to wrath," which is how the King James translators rendered the verse. In other words, there is no specific reference to God, which means that there is some question as to what the verse actually teaches. It could mean four things:

1. Give place to *your enemy's wrath.* That is, step aside and let it pass by you. If there is to be wrath, let it be his rather than yours.
2. Give place to *your own wrath.* That is, give it time to expend itself. Don't do anything hasty. Let the pressure in you dissipate.
3. Give place to *the wrath of the civil magistrate.* That is, let the case come before the courts. That is what they are for.
4. Give place to *God's wrath.* This is the view of the translators of the New International Version, who have added the word "God's" to clarify what they believe the text is teaching.

Of these four interpretations, the middle two can probably be eliminated quickly. The second, giving place to your own wrath, is just a modern idea. We speak of "letting it all hang out" or "getting it off your chest," but that is hardly biblical. In fact, the point of this passage is the precise opposite. We are not to let our wrath out. We are to forego it. The third

interpretation, giving place to the proper function of the civil courts, is not in view either. It is true that the next chapter begins to talk about the role of the civil magistrate, but it does not develop the government's role in providing justice for us when we are wronged but rather the state's role in either punishing or commending us for our behavior.

That leaves either the first or fourth interpretation: (1) that we are to give place to our enemy's wrath, allowing it to work or (4) that we are to leave vengeance to God. The choice here is difficult, because both are true and both have something to commend them. Those who argue for the first view note that stepping back to allow something to pass by is the natural meaning of the Greek verb. Donald Grey Barnhouse says, "Here we are being told simply to endure patiently the wrath of the man who does us wrong. If evil rushes toward us, we are to love the evildoer and stand aside while he strikes out in blind selfishness; for we know that he cannot hurt us in the citadel of the heart where Jesus Christ holds sway." Jesus' command, "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39), is along this exact line.

On the other hand, since the verse goes on to speak of God's wrath, saying, "For it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord," most commentators feel that the idea of giving place to God's wrath is almost inescapable. John Murray says, "Here we have what belongs to the essence of piety. The essence of ungodliness is that we presume to take the place of God, to take everything into our own hands. It is faith to commit ourselves to God, to cast all our care on him and to vest all our interests in him. In reference to the matter in hand, the wrongdoing of which we are the victims, the way of faith is to recognize that God is judge and to leave the execution of vengeance and retribution to him. Never may we in our private personal relations execute the vengeance which wrongdoing merits."

The statement "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" is from Deuteronomy 32:35, but it is also quoted in Hebrews 10:30. It is an essential truth to keep in mind, but it is difficult, especially when we are under attack.

Times of attack are a profound test of faith and of whether or not we really do have an otherworldly perspective.

When we were studying the "pattern of this age" in our exposition of Romans 12:1-2, I contrasted the Christian worldview with that of secularism. Secularism rejects a beyond or a hereafter and sees life only as the now. So, for the secularist, to suggest leaving vengeance to God is utter foolishness. If the secularist is going to get what he wants, it will have to be now. And if justice is going to be done, it will have to be done in this life. Hence retaliation is the answer. It is only a person who sees beyond the now and is willing to trust God to establish justice and meet out punishments and awards hereafter who can be forebearing and hence be a peacemaker.

Remember these words: "'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." They are important.

Active Goodness

The third verse dealing with what it means to "live at peace with everyone" is verse 20, which develops a contrast with the thought of taking vengeance into our own hands. "On the contrary," it says,

> "If your enemy is hungry,
> feed him; if he is thirsty,
> give him something to
> drink.
> In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

The thrust of this verse is clear enough. We are to do good even to those who do evil to us. This is the positive way in which we are to work toward peace or be peacemakers. Moreover, it is a third step in an obvious progression. First, we are to forebear doing evil, not retaliating for wrongs done. Second, we are to do good instead of doing evil. Third, we are to do good even to our enemies. The quotation is from Proverbs 25:21-22.

The difficult part of this is the last line, which as Leon Morris notes in a classic understatement, is "a metaphorical expression whose meaning is

not obvious." What does it mean to "heap burning coals" on our enemy's head? And why should we want to?

Charles Hodge suggests three possible interpretations.

1. *Increasing the enemy's guilt and thus his eventual punishment.* This is the oldest and probably the most widely received interpretation of the metaphor. But this is hardly the thrust of this passage, not to mention that it is also a revolting idea. It amounts to using good as a weapon. That is, "Be good to your enemy, because in the end your good will harm him more than if you were mean." It is hard to imagine Jesus or even a nice worldly person seriously saying that.

2. *Kindness will cause your enemy to become guilty and feel shame.* This is not much better. To be sure, shame might lead to repentance and thus eventually to salvation. But initially it is pain itself that we would be trying to inflict, and this hardly sits well with the idea of doing good to one's enemies or blessing those who curse us, which Paul has expounded just a few verses earlier.

3. *Doing good to one's enemy is the best means of subduing him or winning him over.* Hodge calls this the simplest and natural meaning, saying, "To heap coals of fire on anyone is a punishment which no one can bear; he must yield to it. Kindness is no less effectual; the most malignant enemy cannot always withstand it. The true and Christian method, therefore, to subdue an enemy is to 'overcome evil with good.' " This is where the next verse takes us, of course. For the end of the matter is that evil is to be overcome by good, not good by evil or even evil by evil. Hodge says, "Nothing is so powerful as goodness.... Men whose minds can withstand argument, and whose hearts rebel against threats, are not proof against the persuasive influence of unfeigned love."

And isn't that exactly how the Lord Jesus Christ subdued us to himself? No one was ever reviled so much or as unjustly as Jesus. Yet, as Peter wrote, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when

he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Peter 2:23-25).

It was by his conduct in suffering and before his enemies that Jesus won us, and it is by his death and the power of his resurrection that he enables us to live like him.

His Mind in Us

This leads me to the last point, a very important one. I have been working through what Paul is teaching about peacekeeping or peacemaking, and I have stressed that it requires realism, forbearance, and active goodness to those who do wrong. But perhaps you have been thinking—I know the thought comes to me—"But I can't do it. I don't care if this is the Christian way or is the example of Christ, I can't do it. Nothing is ever going to get me to the point of wanting to do good to those who hate me."

Fair enough. You have to start where you are, and if that is where you are, you have to recognize it. But also recognize that those who belong to Jesus Christ do not have a choice about whether they are going to follow and obey him or not. We must, if we are Christians. Therefore, we must be peacekeepers and peacemakers. We must be like him.

So the question is not Will you? The question is merely How? Let me make two suggestions.

First, you will never make any progress in making peace between yourself and other people until you have first found peace with God. You must be a Christian. Our relationship with God is the most important of all relationships, and if we are not at peace with him, we will never be at peace with others. We will be fighting constantly. That is why Peter went right on to discuss Jesus' death. On the cross Jesus

made peace between rebellious sinners like us and the sovereign, holy God against whom we have rebelled. It is by believing that and trusting in Jesus' finished work that peace with God may be found.

Paul told the Colossians, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:19-20).

Second, if you are to be a peacemaker, you must be at peace yourself, and this means you must have experienced what Paul in Philippians calls the peace of God. "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:57).

First, peace with God. Second, the peace of God. Then, at the last, you will be able to start being a peacekeeper and a peacemaker. For when you are at peace with God and when the life of the Prince of Peace is in you, Jesus will be doing through you what he himself was doing when he was in the world. And while you are at it, do not forget the seventh of the eight Beatitudes, which promises a blessing to peacemakers, adding, "For they will be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

Chapter 198.
The Triumph of Good over Evil

Romans 12:21

We have come to the last sentence of Romans 12, and it is worth noting, as we look back over the preceding verses, that Paul has said three times that we are not to return evil for evil. Verse 14 commands, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Verse 17 urges, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." Now, verse 21, the last verse in the chapter, demands, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with

good." This is Paul's overriding theme in this section. It is why he repeats the idea. But these verses also establish a progression leading from what we must admit is already a very difficult standard to a standard that is even higher—in fact, some would say it's nearly impossible.

Here is how it develops. Verse 14 tells us that we are not to *speak* badly of another person but rather to speak good instead. Verse 17 tells us that we are not to *retaliate* for evil done to us. That concerns *actions.* At the end, in verse 21, Paul takes us beyond anything we might anticipate and tells us that not only are we not to retaliate for evil done to us, but that we are actually *to do good* to others and, amazingly, actually to *overcome* the evil of those other persons by our good conduct.

Love Stronger Than Hate

The standard Paul lays down in this chapter is so unnatural to us and seemingly impossible that I want to begin with the story of a man who has actually lived up to it. His name is John Perkins, a black man who dropped out of school in the third grade but who became a pastor and founder of the Voice of Calvary Ministries in Mendenhall, Mississippi. He has received national recognition for his leadership in race relations, has an honorary doctorate from Wheaton College, and even served on a presidential commission for inner-city problems under President Ronald Reagan.

John Perkins was born in Mississippi. He left the south for California when he was still a teenager, became a Christian in California, and later returned to Mississippi because he believed God was calling him to preach the gospel to the poor black people he had been raised with and help them by developing and supporting black leadership.

On February 7, 1970, a Saturday night, a van of black college students who had been taking part in a civil rights march was pulled over by highway patrolmen from Brandon, Mississippi, and the students were arrested. Perkins and two of his associates went to the jail to post bail,

but when they arrived they were surrounded by five deputy sheriffs and several highway patrolmen who arrested them and began to beat them.

Perkins had not been speeding, taking drugs, or resisting arrest. He didn't even have a police record. All he had done was go to the jail to post bail for the students. But he was a black leader, and he was hated.

Perkins was beaten most of that night, along with some of the others. They stomped on him and kicked him in the head, ribs, and groin. One officer brought a fork over to him and said, "Do you see this?" Then he jammed it up his nose. After that he shoved it down his throat. For part of that terrible evening Perkins was unconscious and so mutilated that the students who were watching over him in his cell thought that he was either dead or about to die. It was a case of evil in a particularly vicious, violent, racist form.

Yet it did something good for Perkins. Up to this point he had been in Mississippi to preach to black people only. It was all he was allowed to do, of course. The doors of virtually all white churches were closed to him. But the beating changed him and gave him a new vision. He wrote:

I remembered their faces—so twisted with hate. It was like looking at white-faced demons. For the first time I saw what hate had done to those people. These policemen were poor. They saw themselves as failures. The only way they knew how to find a sense of worth was by beating us. Their racism made them feel like "somebody."

When I saw that, I just couldn't hate back. I could only pity them. I said to God that night, "God, if you will get me out of this jail alive"—and I really didn't think I would, maybe I was trying to bargain with him—"I really want to preach a gospel that will heal these people, too."

Perkins's recovery took some time, since he needed to heal both physically and emotionally. The physical recovery was assisted by a pair of compassionate doctors, one white and one black. The emotional healing was accomplished by God, who taught him that the same gospel that frees blacks also frees whites and that real justice, if it was to come,

would come "only as people's hearts were made right with God and God's love motivated them to be reconciled to each other." "Now that God had enabled me to forgive the many whites who had wronged me, I found myself able to truly love them," said Perkins. "I wanted to return good for evil." And Perkins did! His ministry is the proof of that desire, and it is continuing. It is a striking case of a believer refusing to be overcome by evil but instead overcoming evil with good.

Do Not Be Overcome, but Overcome

Our text has two parts. The first says, "Do not be overcome by evil." That is the negative. The second part says, "But overcome evil with good." That is the positive. Of the two it is the hardest to accomplish.

1. *Do not be overcome by evil.* The negative part is hard enough, of course. This is because to be overcome by evil means to respond to evil with evil, that is, to fight back, and that is the most natural thing for a sinful human being to do. It was summed up in a recent comic strip in which Hagar the Horrible tells his son, "Son, don't let the sun go down upon your wrath.... Attack your enemy at once and waste him while what he did to you is still fresh in your mind."

Unfortunately, there are many examples of just that kind of retaliation and of the evil that comes from it. There is the example of Mattathias, one of the Maccabees, who commanded his followers, "Avenge the wrong done to your people. Pay back the Gentiles in full" (1 Macc. 2:6768 NRSV). They tried, but much damage to Israel and an untold loss of lives was the result. We have seen the attitude in Israel in a tit-for-tat policy against the Arabs of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. We have seen it in South Africa, which seemed on the very edge of a genocidal civil war in spite of the heroic efforts of some leaders, both black and white, to avoid it and move toward reconciliation and justice. We have seen the identical attitude in the former Yugoslavia, where centuries old racial and religious hatred have fueled one of the most destructive wars of recent history. Indeed, this is the case in every place

where the normal human instinct for retaliation and the cherishing of hatreds holds sway.

This must not be the case with Christians. Christians are not to avenge themselves. Instead, as Jesus said, "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Matt. 5:39-40).

2. *Overcome evil with good.* Yet not only are we not to strike back, thus being overcome by evil, with evil ruling the day, we are to respond positively in love, thus overcoming the evil in the situation and in the other person with our good.

Every time I get on the positive side of this matter I feel that the standard is so far above most of us as to seem almost unreal. I have already given a great living example of this principle in the life of John Perkins. David and his treatment of King Saul is a good illustration of this from the Old Testament.

David had served Saul faithfully, killed Goliath, fought his battles, and become a hero of the nation. But that had incited Saul to jealousy, and at this point Saul was pursuing David ruthlessly to put him to death. Taking three thousand men with him, Saul pursued David into the wilderness of En Gedi. David was hiding in a cave, and Saul entered, not even suspecting he was there. While the king was in the cave David crept forward and cut off a corner of Saul's robe, which he used to prove his love for the king. Yet so far was David from wanting to do any evil to Saul that he was conscience-stricken just for having cut off the corner of the robe.

When Saul went out again David followed and called to him, "My lord the king!" (1 Sam. 24:8). Saul looked back. David continued. "Why do you listen when men say, 'David is bent on harming you'? This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the Lord's

anointed.' See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. Now understand and recognize that I am not guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you" (1 Sam. 24:9-13).

When Saul heard this he was stricken with guilt and wept aloud. "You are more righteous than I," he said. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly.... May the LORD reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. Now swear to me by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family" (1 Sam. 24:1621). David promised this and they parted on good terms, at least temporarily.

A short time later a similar incident occurred. Saul and his guard of soldiers were sleeping in their camp, and David and his friend Abishai went to it secretly and removed Saul's spear and water bottle. Then they called to the king from a hilltop some distance away, showing the spear and water bottle as proof that once again the Lord had placed Saul in David's power and that he had spared him graciously, since David could have killed Saul if he had wanted to. "Why is my lord pursuing his servant?" David cried. "What have I done, and what wrong am I guilty of?" (1 Sam. 26:18).

Saul answered, "I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have erred greatly" (1 Sam. 26:21).

We know, of course, that Saul was unable to change his character, and therefore these were only temporary embarrassments and confessions. He never stopped trying to kill David, and he was stopped only when God allowed Saul and his son Jonathan to be slain in battle with the

Philistines. But on these two occasions, for a short time at least, good triumphed gloriously, and good attended David's long reign in no small measure because of the way he was known to have conducted himself then. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." David triumphed in both of these areas and prospered because of it.

Who Is Sufficient for This?

How are we to live like this? How can we, being what we are? In his study of Romans 12, Robert Candlish observes, "This surely is a very holy calling. It is a very awful calling. We may well ask, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' And we can be sustained only when we are enabled to add, 'Our sufficiency is of God'—of that God who has so dealt with us as he would have us to deal with our fellowmen and fellow-sinners."

How are we to overcome evil with good, when our natures are so contrary to this standard? Candlish has suggested a first means. I want to develop it and add two more suggestions.

1. *We must know with deep gratitude that this is how God has treated us.* We deserved to be condemned, but God was good to us and overcame our evil by his good. If we appreciate this rightly, it will empower us to do the same. In fact, if we do not have this spirit, it will be sound evidence that we do not know God and have not experienced his grace in salvation.

I think of the story Jesus told about the unmerciful servant. This man owed the king ten thousand talents, the equivalent of several million dollars. Since he was unable to pay, the king was going to sell him, his wife, and his children into slavery. But the servant fell on his knees and begged for mercy, promising to pay back everything. This was an impossible thing to do, of course. But the king took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.

This servant then found another servant who owed him a mere pittance. He demanded repayment. The servant who owed only a little pleaded

for a chance to pay his debt, but the first man refused and had the other cast into prison. When the king heard this, he recalled the first servant, rebuked him, and had him jailed too. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart," Jesus concluded (see Matt. 18:21-35).

The parable does not teach that we are saved from sin by good works, of course. We are saved by grace alone. It does teach, however, that if we have been saved by grace we will be gracious and that, if we are not, we have never actually known the grace of God and will be judged for our sins at the final judgment. If it does nothing else, the parable shows why overcoming evil with good is not optional for Christians. We must forgive because we have been forgiven. We must overcome evil with good because God has overcome our even greater evil in saving us.

2. *We must study the example of Jesus Christ.* The second thing we need if we are to learn what it is to overcome evil with good and actually overcome it is the example of Jesus Christ. For this is what Jesus did, and if he is our Savior, we will love him and want to be like him.

Charles Hodge has written:

One of the most beautiful exhibitions of the character of our Savior was afforded by his conduct under persecution. "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter"; "when he was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not." Even martyrs dying for the truth have not always been able to avoid the prediction of evil to their persecutors, so much easier is it to abstain from recompensing evil for evil than really to love and pray for the good of our enemies. This, however, is Christian duty; such is the spirit of the gospel.

This is what moved John Perkins. He saw the enslaving nature of white racial hatred as he was being beaten. But it was later, as he was recovering in the hospital that God directed him to Jesus and by this means began to work powerfully on his heart. He wrote:

The Spirit of God worked on me as I lay in that bed. An image formed in my mind—the image of a cross, of Christ on the cross. This Jesus

knew what I had suffered. He understood. He cared. Because he had gone through it all himself.

He too was arrested and falsely accused. He too had an unjust trial. He too was beaten. Then he was nailed to a cross and killed like a common criminal. But when he looked at the mob who had crucified him, he didn't hate them; he loved them. And he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

His enemies hated, but he forgave. God wouldn't let me escape that. He showed me that however unjustly I had been treated, in my bitterness and hatred I was just as sinful as those who had beaten me. And I needed forgiveness for my bitterness.

I read Matthew 6:14, 15 again and again in that bed: "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your heavenly Father will not forgive your transgressions." To receive God's forgiveness, I was going to have to forgive those who had hurt me. As I prayed, the faces of those policemen passed before me one by one, and I forgave each one. Faces of other white people from the past came before me, and I forgave them. I could sense that God was working a deep inner healing in me that went far back beyond February 7, 1970. It went clear back to my earliest memories of childhood. God was healing all those wounds that had kept me from loving whites. How sweet God's forgiveness and healing was.

Nothing in all history has done so much to heal deep human hurts and redirect otherwise resentful and retaliating lives than the example of Jesus Christ, who "suffered for [us]... that [we] should follow in his steps.... He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Peter 2:21, 24-25).

3. *We must be close to Christ and strive to draw closer to him always.* Important as the example of Jesus Christ is, that example alone is not enough. Nor is merely being saved enough, otherwise Paul would not be urging the Romans to this high standard of conduct, as he is doing. It would be automatic. In order to live as Christ we must first belong to Christ and second draw close to Christ, indeed striving to draw closer to him always. Charles Hodge says, "We must remember that without Christ we can do nothing.... If, therefore, we attempt to discharge the duties here enjoined apart from him, we shall be as a branch severed from the vine; and unless we are 'instant in prayer,' this union with Christ cannot be kept up."

Paul himself was weak. He called himself "the worst" of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Yet he also said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). So can you, if you stay close to Jesus.

A Remarkable Chapter

As we look back over this remarkable chapter, starting with the offering of our bodies to God as living sacrifices and ending with the offering of ourselves and own best efforts to others in order that, by the grace of God, we might overcome their evil with good, we marvel at the wisdom, scope, and power of a gospel that can do that. It is a gospel that can take sinners who have lived only for themselves and turn them into men and women who actually overcome the evil of this world. Who could ever think up a gospel like that? Not us, for sure. Only God could devise such a powerful gospel.

Here is how Robert Haldane describes it:

In the above remarkable portion of Scripture, we learn the true tendency of the doctrine of salvation wholly by grace, established in a manner so powerful in the preceding part of this epistle, by which men are created in Christ Jesus unto good works. How beautiful is it, and how sublime when displayed in all its practical effects in the duties which flow from it.... We may search all the works of the most admired writers and, so far as they have not borrowed from the fountain of inspired truth, we

shall find in them nothing comparable to the elevated maxims contained in this chapter. Especially we shall not discover the faintest shadow of resemblance to the motives by which these duties are here inculcated. If the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth forth his handiworks—if the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that the heathen are without excuse—how much more clearly do the Scriptures proclaim their Divine origin, and the majesty of their Author! God hath magnified his word above all his name.

Indeed, he has! God has exalted his truth above anything else that we can possibly hope to understand or know. It is for us now to exalt God's name and Word by living out his truth in the way we go about our daily lives.

Part Eighteen. Church and State

Chapter 199. Authority

Romans 13:1

In the fall of 1561 an important conversation took place in Scotland between Queen Mary and the Calvinistic Protestant preacher John Knox.

Mary was a Catholic. She had been educated in Catholic France, and she believed that sovereigns—she herself was one—had absolute power over the consciences of their subjects. Knox was a reformer. For his uncompromising preaching he had been sentenced to serve as a galley slave for nineteen months. After his release, he had studied in Geneva under John Calvin from 1553 to 1559. Then, in the summer of 1560, he had participated in the drafting of the Scottish Confession of Faith that stated that Jesus Christ "is the only Head of His Kirk" (sections 11 and 18). Knox had returned just two years before his celebrated conversation with Queen Mary.

In the interview Mary accused Knox of having wrongly taught the people to receive another religion than their princes allow. "And how can that doctrine be of God, seeing that God commands subjects to obey their princes?" she asked. She was referring to Romans 13:1 and other texts.

Knox answered, "Madam, as right religion took neither [its] origin nor authority from worldly princes, but from the Eternal God alone, so are not subjects bound to frame their religion according to the appetites of their princes."

He admonished Mary, "God commands queens to be nurses unto his people." "Yes, but you are not the church that I will

nourish," she retorted.

Knox replied, "Your will, Madam, is no reason." In this way the issues of church and state and the proper role and function of the state were framed in Scotland in the sixteenth century. There was no relief in Scotland until Mary's forced abdication in 1567.

Christians and the State

What is the role of the state in human affairs? How is the state to relate to the church of Jesus Christ? How are Christian people to relate to the government's authority? It is these questions that Paul raises and answers in the first seven verses of Romans 13.

What a source of controversy they have been! J. C. O'Neill in *Paul's Letter to The Romans* wrote, "These seven verses have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses in the New Testament." That is probably not true. But they have certainly puzzled many and caused unhappiness among some scholars. Some of them, like the one I just quoted, have attempted to eliminate the verses from the letter, reasoning that they are un-Pauline and come rather from a Stoic source. Such persons think the verses have been interpolated, arguing that verse 8 would follow nicely after 12:21, and that there is nothing quite like this section anywhere else in Paul's writing.

This is true, but that does not mean that Paul did not write it. Furthermore, it can be argued equally well that his discussion of the legitimate authority and proper function of the state is a natural follow-up to the immediately preceding section in which he presented the duty of the Christian to return good for evil, since to do that does not mean that a Christian always has to be victimized by evil persons. It is the state's duty to restrain and punish evil.

Again, a discussion of the role of the state is natural in a letter to Christians living at the center of the Roman world. Jews were notoriously resistant to all outside authority. They had fomented numerous rebellions, and the greatest one of all, the rebellion that was

to be crushed by the Roman general Titus in 70 A.D., was only a decade away from the time Paul wrote this letter. In the sixties Christians were shielded under a law originally promulgated by Julius Caesar, but turmoil was coming. Were the followers of Christ to align themselves with the coming revolution, or were they to be loyal citizens of the all-encompassing Roman empire? If so, what about the lordship of Jesus Christ? Was he King, or was he not? If they were not to be loyal citizens, what was their position regarding Rome to be?

The Starting Point: God Is Sovereign

The starting point of Paul's argument is found in the reason he gives for his categorical opening statement that "everyone," not only Christians, "must submit himself to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1). Why? The answer is not that you will get into trouble if you don't, or even that obedience is necessary for maintaining social order. Those are excellent pragmatic reasons that Paul understands and will bring into the discussion in due time, but they are not the reasons he gives at the beginning. What he says in verse 1 is that we must obey the authorities because "there is no authority except that which God has established" and "the authorities that exist have been established by God."

In other words, the starting point for Paul's argument is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, in this case in regard to human rulers. God is sovereign. Therefore, those who exercise authority do so because God has established them in their positions.

We have to take this sovereignty seriously, because it is easy for us to accept God's being sovereign when we are given Christian rulers or when people of high moral character are elevated to positions of responsibility. But what about evil rulers? What about Nero, the corrupt emperor who was reigning in Rome at the very time Paul was writing this letter? What about rulers who persecuted the church? Or, for that matter, what about such evil leaders as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Idi Amin, or even elected officials like Richard Nixon, who betrayed our trust and disappointed us?

Romans 13:1 tells us that even these authorities have been established by God, and that we have a legitimate (though not unlimited) responsibility to obey even them.

We have already come across one example of an evil but nevertheless God-established ruler in Romans, though Paul was not specifically thinking about the role of the state when he brought him into his discussion. This example is Pharaoh, the oppressor of the Jews. He worked them as slaves and arrogantly resisted Moses' demand that he let God's people go. God judged this arrogance. Egypt was ruined by a series of ten plagues, culminating in the death of all the firstborn children of the country. In the end Pharaoh and his armies were destroyed by drowning in the Red Sea. But evil as this man was, he had nevertheless been put into his position by God, which Paul clearly says.

That is the teaching of Romans 9:17, where Paul quotes God as telling Pharaoh, "*I raised you up* for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (quoting Exod. 9:16). God raised Pharaoh up so that he might display his wrath in judging him. It was not a desirable appointment, but still it was God who had raised him up simply because God is sovereign in all things.

A second example is Nebuchadnezzar, another arrogant ruler. He thought he was superior to
Jehovah because he had been able to conquer Jerusalem, raze the temple, and carry off to Babylon the gold and silver objects that had been used by the Jewish priests in their worship. The first four chapters of Daniel are a record of the struggle that took place as Nebuchadnezzar contended for sovereignty and God worked to humble him and show him that God alone, not Nebuchadnezzar, is the Most High God and ruler of all.

Three times in Daniel 4 the text says that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (vv. 17, 25, 32): (1) Nebuchadnezzar heard these words in his dream; (2) Daniel recited them to him as the words of God; (3) Nebuchadnezzar heard

them from heaven when God uttered his important, symbolic judgment of insanity upon the stiffnecked ruler. This is an important truth, and in the end Nebuchadnezzar seems to have gotten the message, for he confessed:

I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

> His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
> All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing.
> He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth.
> No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"...

Everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Daniel 4:34-35, 37

Another example is Cyrus the Persian, who is also mentioned in Daniel (1:21, 6:28, 10:1). He was an unusually humane ruler, whom God used to bring the Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylon. In Isaiah 45:1 this pagan king is even called the Lord's "anointed," which means messiah, the very title given to Jesus as the Messiah of God.

These rulers—Nero, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus—and all others have been set in their places by God, simply because God is sovereign and, as the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass" (III, 1). There is no ruler anywhere or from any time in history who was not set in his exalted position by God.

Obeying the Sovereign

Of course, the problem for us is not so much that God has established whatever rulers there may be. We can believe that abstractly and either like and approve of our rulers, or not like them and disapprove of them, or perhaps even reject them. The problem is that we are told that it is the duty of Christians to obey those who exercise such authority, and that includes *all* authorities, not just kings and presidents but also policemen, judges, schoolteachers, bosses, and other such "governing authorities." We do not want to do that.

Paul is writing about the civil government in Romans 13, but these other authorities come into the picture tangentially because they have governing roles and have been set in place by God.

There are many obvious problems at this point. First, Paul does not answer a lot of our questions. For example, when is a government a legitimate government, and when isn't it? When is it right to rebel against an unjust or tyrannical government, or isn't it permitted at all? What about our own American War of Independence? If we had been living then, what side should we have been on, with England or with the colonists? What are we to do when there are rival claimants to the throne? Which one should we obey? Again, at what point does an unjust ruler become legitimate?

Or what about limits? Paul says we are to obey the governing authorities. But does this mean that we are to obey everything they command? What about unjust acts commanded by an evil government? Killing civilians? Lying? Clandestine operations even for such an important branch of government as the CIA? Are there no limits to what must be obeyed?

We are going to explore the limits to the obedience Christians can give a civil government in the next study. But the point I am making here is that the matter of obedience to those in authority cannot be taken lightly, as we are so often inclined to do.

As far as Romans 13:1 is concerned, it would be difficult, probably impossible, for anyone to write a more all-encompassing, absolute, or utterly unqualified statement than the one Paul has given: "Everyone

[literally, 'every soul'] must submit himself to the governing authorities."

This is written so strongly that Robert Haldane thinks that it requires an obedience to secular rulers that is almost absolute: "Everyone, without exception, is, by the command of God, to be subject to the existing powers, whatever were the means by which they became possessed of the situation in which they stand.... If God has appointed every government that exists in the world, his people are bound to submit to every government under which their lot has been cast."

Power or Authority?

There *are* limits, of course, but the place to begin is not with the limits, but by trying to understand the nature of the authority that has been given to civil rulers. The key word is *authority,* which occurs six times in these verses.

Two Greek words are used of political power that are closely connected but need to be distinguished. The first is *kratos,* which refers to what we might call "the naked power of rule." It can be legitimate or illegitimate, as in the case of the devil, who, we are told, has "the power of death" (Heb. 2:14) but who will lose it when Jesus returns. His power will be taken away, and he will be cast into the lake of fire. This word has proved useful in describing the various types of government. For example, we speak of democracy. *Demos* means people, crowd, or public assembly. *Kratos* means rule. So democracy means rule by the people (or by many people). A plutocracy is a system in which the rich (or aristocrats) rule, because *ploutos* means wealth.

So when we speak of *power* (*kratos*) we recognize that there can be both legitimate and illegitimate power. And, of course, Christians are under no obligation to obey a power that is illegitimate. Just because a man with a gun orders us to do something does not mean that we should do it necessarily. The man has power, but it is illegitimate. What we need is a legitimate power—a policeman—to subdue him.

The other word that is used of political as well as other kinds of power is *exousia*, which is the word Paul uses in Romans 13. *Exousia* is a delegated power, power that is given to a person or group of persons by another. Paul uses it in Romans 13 because he wants to make explicit that the authority of the governing powers is from God.

Nevertheless, they are responsible for how they exercise it. That is the important thing. They are responsible to God, precisely because God has given them the power. So here in one word is both the legitimacy and the necessary accountability of human government.

Jesus before Pilate

An important example is Jesus Christ's trial before Pontius Pilate. Jesus was tried for treason because, as his accusers put it, he "claim[ed] to be a king" (John 19:12). It did not take Pilate long to discover that the kind of kingdom Jesus was talking about was no direct threat to Rome, because it was a kingdom of truth. Jesus told him, "I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37). After he had heard that, Pilate knew that this was a religious matter and was of no concern to him.

Yet the leaders of the people were still clamoring for Jesus' death, and it became clear that Pilate was soon going to bow to their wishes. He wanted to help Jesus, but Jesus was not speaking to him. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" (John 19:10).

At this point Jesus replied with one of two classic texts for helping us understand the God-given role of civil government and the right relationship of the church to the state. He answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (John 19:11).

The word that is translated *power* in this verse is the same word that Paul uses in Romans 13, and it is used in exactly the same way. The authority that was given to Pilate was a delegated authority, because it

had been given to him by God. It was a true authority. Pilate had the right to try Jesus and render judgment as he thought right. But he was responsible to God for what he did and for how he did it. That is why Jesus was able to remind him, "Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of *a greater sin."* The sin of the Jewish leaders was greater than the sin of Pilate, because they were sinning against the Scriptures, which pointed to Jesus and were fulfilled by Jesus, and against their consciences, as even Pilate recognized ("It was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him," Matt. 27:18). Nevertheless, Pilate was also sinning by condemning an innocent man, and he would have to answer to God for it.

Pilate had authority in Christ's trial. He could decide as he wished. He decided wrongly, but he had authority to make that decision even if it was wrong. This is because his authority was from God, and Jesus did not suggest that it be wrested from him even because he had made so great an error as condemning the Son of God. If nothing else, the example of Jesus before Pilate shows us that for Christians revolution for the sake of revolution alone ("I would rather be king than you") is wrong.

Indeed, instead of being revolutionaries, Christians are obligated to be the very best citizens possible. We should obey speed limits, pay bur taxes honestly, vote in elections, and in all other respects respond with respect and compliance to those who are over us.

To Tell the Truth

Yet this does not mean that Christians are merely to be pliant, lying down in the face of evil and doing nothing to oppose it. Again, we have the example of Jesus. Jesus did not show disrespect to Pilate. He did not warn him that if he failed to rule justly, Jesus' followers would rise up and do their best to unseat him and the Roman government. Jesus knew what the governor would do, and he accepted it as from God, which it surely was. But Jesus was not silent. He spoke of the truth, which he

had been sent to make known, and he reminded Pilate that Pilate was sinning and would therefore one day himself have to answer for it.

That is our role. We speak often today of the separation of church and state, and we should be thankful for that separation. It is a dearly won liberty to have a church free from government interference or control and to have a state free from clerical domination. *But the separation of church and state does not mean the separation of God and state.* And though we do not rule the state, nor should we, it is nevertheless our duty as Christians to speak out against the civil ruler's sins and remind the governing authorities that they are ultimately accountable to him from whom their authority comes.

So we are accountable too! We are accountable to speak up. We do not have the power of the sword. That is reserved for the civil authorities, as Paul will show in Romans 13:4. Our weapon is truth, for we are a kingdom of the truth. The truth is stronger than the sword. But woe to us if we do not wield the sword of truth powerfully.

Chapter 200.
Must Caesar Always Be Obeyed?

Romans 13:2

Left to ourselves we are like those described in the last verse of the Book of Judges when "Israel had no king; [and] everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg. 21:25). That is why Paul insists in Romans 13:1 that we are to obey secular authorities: The state is God's wise provision for avoiding anarchy.

Having been told that we must obey the authorities, the next two verses of Romans 13 give us reasons why we should. First, if we disobey the state we will be disobeying God, and God will punish us (v. 2). Second, the government will also punish us (v. 3). Verse 2, which we are to study carefully now says, "Consequently, he who rebels against

the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

Must Obedience Be Absolute?

This raises some important questions. For example, are there no conditions under which rebellion against the existing authority is justified? Or demanded? Suppose the state is tyrannical. Suppose it is violating human rights. And what about obedience itself? Must obedience be absolute, or are there limits? Can we obey in some areas and not others? Must Caesar *always* be obeyed?

That question alludes to Jesus' celebrated response to the question his enemies raised about taxes, and is one of two classic texts for helping us understand the God-given role of government and our rightful relationship to it.

We examined the first of these two classic texts in the last study: Jesus' reply to Pilate at his trial. Pilate had asked him if he were not aware that Pilate had power either to free Jesus or to crucify him. Jesus replied, "You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of the greater sin" (John 19:11). We saw that the word translated as *power* is actually the word *authority* and that it refers to an authority that is delegated. In other words, Jesus said that although Pilate had a true authority, that authority had been given to him by God and he was therefore responsible to God for how he used it. This verse lays the groundwork for the limitations of the state's authority.

The setting for the second classic text is this. Jesus' enemies had come to him with a trick question: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Matt. 22:17). They thought that if he said it was right to pay taxes, they could discredit him with the people who hated Rome and for whom taxes were a greatly resented burden. He would be dismissed as a collaborator. On the other hand, if Jesus said that they should resist Rome by refusing to pay their taxes, then his enemies could denounce him to the Roman authorities as an insurrectionist.

Jesus asked for a coin. When they produced it, he asked whose portrait was on it and whose inscription, probably holding it out to them so they could see it. "Caesar's," they replied.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus said, thus laying the basis for the exact teaching Paul gives in Romans 13:7, when he says, "Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes." However, at this point I think Jesus must have flipped the coin over, exposing the back on which there would have been a portrait of one of the Roman gods or goddesses. And he continued, making the contrast, *"and to God what is God's"* (Matt. 22:21).

The first part of Jesus' answer reinforced Caesar's authority, even in such an unpopular matter as taxes. His second part drew limits. Although the state has a God-given and therefore legitimate authority, the authority of God is greater. Therefore, those who know God must worship and obey him, even if it means disobeying Caesar.

Four Logical Options

Jesus' words in response to the question about taxes suggest four options that I have found useful in dealing with this matter of the state's authority and the rightful limits of a Christian's compliance with it: (1) God alone as an authority with the authority of Caesar denied, (2) Caesar alone as an authority with the authority of God denied, (3) the authority of both God and Caesar but with Caesar in the dominant position, and (4) the authority of God and Caesar but with God in the dominant position.

1. *God alone as an authority.* The first option is one some Christians have embraced at some periods of history, especially when the state has become excessively oppressive or corrupt. In the early church, some people called anchorites went off into the desert, thus separating themselves from all social contacts and living, as they believed, solely for the service of God. From that early movement monasticism was born.

It would be an error to think that this has been practiced only in the early church or by members of monastic orders. Monasticism is also the practical approach of evangelical Christians who so separate themselves from the secular world that they withdraw from the surrounding culture, refuse to participate in elections, have only Christian friends, or will work only for Christian companies.

2. *Caesar alone as an authority.* The second option is that of most secularists and sometimes even of so-called Christians: the choice of Caesar alone. It was the way chosen by the Jewish leaders at the time of Christ's trial, when they told Caesar (incredibly, in view of their past and their knowledge of the Old Testament), "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15).

This is the most dangerous of the four options, because if God is left out, Caesar is left with no ultimate accountability. He has nothing to restrain his whims or cruelty.

In America we recognize the need for checks upon governmental power, so each of our three main branches of government has a check on the others. The president (of the executive branch) appoints Supreme Court justices (of the judicial branch); but if the president gets out of line, the Senate (part of the legislative branch) can impeach him. The president initiates programs, but Congress must fund them. As for Congress, it can make laws, but the president can refuse to sign them (the power of the veto), or the judicial branch can declare them unconstitutional. The Supreme Court is carefully protected out of respect for our laws. We claim to be a nation governed by laws, not by men. But the court cannot initiate legislation; it can only pass on it, and the president has the power to appoint the justices.

We have created this system of checks and balances because we recognize that people in positions of power are untrustworthy. But if that is true on the merely human level, how much truer is it on the cosmic level. Human rulers regularly conspire against God (Ps. 2). So if we forsake God, we are at the mercy of our governors.

3. *The authority of God and Caesar but with Caesar in the dominant position.* The third option is one many persons would claim, but it is the position of cowards. This is because if God's authority is recognized at all, it must be supreme simply because God is supreme by definition. That is what it means to be God. So if anyone claims to obey the state before God or rather than God, while nevertheless still believing in God, it can only be because he is afraid of what Caesar can do to him.

This was the case with Pilate. He knew Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. He declared him innocent and even tried to release him. But in the end he gave in and had Jesus crucified. Why? Because he was afraid of Caesar. Toward the end of the trial, when Pilate was holding out against their wishes, the Jewish authorities played their trump card, crying out, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar" (John 19:12). Pilate, who feared Caesar and wanted to be a friend of Caesar more than anything else in the entire world, gave in and thus condemned the sinless Son of God.

The irony is that Pilate failed to secure Caesar's friendship even so, because a few years later he was removed from office by the proconsul of Syria and banished to France, where he died.

4. *The authority of God and Caesar but with God in the dominant position.* The last option is the only valid one: God and Caesar, but with God in the dominant position. It was the position Jesus articulated when he said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Because Christians recognize the authority of the state, they are (or should be) the very best of citizens, in two ways. First, they should obey the state in all areas of its legitimate authority. As I said in the last study, we should obey the speed limits, pay our taxes honestly, vote in elections, support worthy civic endeavors, speak well of our rulers, and support and pray for them. Calvin expressed this well when he wrote, "We are not only subject to the authority of princes who perform their office toward us uprightly and faithfully as they ought, but also to the

authority of all who, by whatever means, have got control of affairs, even though they perform not a whit of the princes' office."

However, the other way Christians should be the very best of citizens is by opposing the state verbally and by acts of noncompliance whenever the government strays from its legitimate Godgiven function or transgresses the moral law of God. In the last study we saw that we are to do this chiefly by words—that is, by rational argument, not by coercive power. The power of the sword is the state's, not ours. Nevertheless, we are also to resist and even disobey the state when necessary.

Limitation Number One: Evangelism

The first area in which Christians cannot recognize the authority of the government and must therefore disobey it is whenever the state forbids the preaching of the gospel or evangelism. This is because Christians have a God-given duty to evangelize. We call it the Great Commission. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). He told the eleven, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). He said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

What must happen when the authorities demand differently is illustrated in Acts 4 and 5. The disciples had been preaching in Jerusalem, but they had created such a stir that the leaders of the people called them in and, meeting in solemn assembly, commanded that the apostles keep silent. Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:1920).

The apostles were threatened and released, but they went right back to their preaching. They were arrested again. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name [the high priest said]. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood" (Acts 5:28).

The apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men" (v. 29).

This incident makes clear that Christians are to give preference to the preaching of the gospel and are not to cease from it even though commanded to do so by the civil authorities. They may suffer for it. Many of the early preachers were arrested and beaten. Some were killed. But they evangelized anyway. We need to remember this in our age, which is becoming increasingly intolerant of any public articulation of Christian faith and truth.

Limitation Number Two: Morality

A second biblical limit on obedience to human authorities is in moral areas affecting Christian conduct. No government has the right to command Christians to perform immoral or nonChristian acts. During the Nazi era Christians in Germany were faced with a devilish state and its openly anti-Christian and even antihuman practices. German citizens were commanded to have no dealings with the Jews. They were not to trade with them, have friendships with them, or even acknowledge them. This was an unjustified demand on Christians to behave immorally, and those who disobeyed these laws were right to do so.

Corrie ten Boom and her family were right to hide Jews and thus try to save their lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right to speak out against Hitler, organize an underground church, and strengthen its opposition and witness.

Martin Niemoeller was right to go on preaching the truth even to the point of being imprisoned for it. We are told that another minister visited him in jail and argued that he would be set free if only he would agree to keep silent about certain subjects. "So why are you in jail?" he concluded.

"Why aren't you in jail?" Niemoeller countered.

In our country Christians must also speak out against racism, government and corporate corruption, sex and age discrimination, and

other evils. At the present moment in America it is unlikely that you will be imprisoned for speaking the truth, though that may come in time. But you might lose your job for refusing to be dishonest or for calling those who are not honest to account. You might lose your chance for promotion. You might be cut out of the leadership circle. No matter. You must still speak up, and you must act justly even if you are pressured to comply.

Limitation Number Three: Civil Disobedience

There is a third area in which Christians must disobey the state, but it is a difficult one in which to remain truly biblical—when the state flagrantly ignores either righteousness or justice and those who are sensitive to these wrongs feel the need to do more than merely speak out. This differs from the previous area in that the former limitation concerned times in which Christians are pressured to act immorally themselves and must refuse, while this refers to government immorality and the need for Christians to do something to change it.

We generally speak of this as civil disobedience, and there are many excellent examples of it having been done rightly and with success. The Civil Rights movement of the sixties is a good example.

The problem is that as soon as we move away from words only (that is, speaking the truth and calling the rulers to account) and into the area of direct action, it is easy to cross over the line into a wrong method of responding and thus become guilty not merely of breaking an unjust law but of breaking just and even moral laws. Let me give two examples.

1. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* I have already commended Dietrich Bonhoeffer for his stand against the evils of the Nazi state. He is also to be commended for courageously returning to Germany from America, where he was living at the time, to help the struggling church and give it leadership. But Bonhoeffer was not executed for speaking out against Nazism. He was executed for being involved in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. We can

understand how he might have felt that assassination was the only course left to him to stop the growing evil, but desperation does not make murder right, and at this point he clearly went beyond any possible biblical sanction.

We can contrast his conduct with that of David in his struggle against King Saul. God had already removed his blessing from Saul, and Saul was seeking David's life. David did not have to wait in Jerusalem to be killed. He had every right to flee. This was a form of disobedience. But David did not cross over the line and try to kill Saul. On the contrary, he spared his life on at least two occasions while he waited for God to remove him, which God did in the end.

Jesus told Peter, "All who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52).

2. *Operation Rescue.* The second example is often on our minds because it is current: the attempt of Christians to stem the terrible destruction of human life through abortions, which are legal by today's laws. This effort is best exemplified by a group called Operation Rescue, although other organizations are also involved.

When I am talking about the abortion problem, as I often do, I usually challenge the blockading of abortion clinics on the basis of the methodology being used. I say that we live in a television age and that television turns our tactics against us to the point of our losing the battle against this great evil. I say that television will never record a serious discussion about the true nature of abortion or the value of a life made in the image of God conducted between an anti-abortionist and a woman who is considering an abortion. It is not good television. But as soon as a restraining order is issued and the police arrive to begin arresting the demonstrators and placing them in paddy wagons, then the cameras roll. For this makes good television, and we who oppose abortion appear on television as people who are violent and who want to take away other people's rights. That is a problem the pro-life people need to consider carefully.

But that is not the issue here. There is nothing wrong with being arrested in itself. The problem in this area is the carryover from mere protest and the attempt to persuade people by speaking the truth to breaking otherwise perfectly valid laws, like rights of private property, freedom of movement, and so forth.

We can applaud the courage of those who demonstrate. We should endorse the issue they represent. We must love them as Christian brothers and sisters. But we must still say that it is not right to trespass on others' property. It is not right to make it difficult for people to enter abortion clinics, if they choose to do so. Above all, it is not right to invade the clinics, destroy records and equipment, or do things that are even worse.

The problem in this area can be seen in the Florida case in which one demonstrator shot and killed a doctor who had been performing abortions. The act was not courageous or godly. It was murder.

I want to make every allowance for the right exercise of the consciences of other people in these areas. I understand that many feel they must do something to attract attention to the evil that exists rather than do nothing. But as Charles Colson observes in *Kingdoms in Conflict*, "In our day, breaking laws to make a dramatic point is the ultimate logic of terrorism, not civil disobedience." And what is also true, "Civil disobedience, like law itself, is habit-forming, and the habit it forms is destructive of law." Rightly practiced civil disobedience has its place. But we have to be very careful how we use it and what we may be unleashing if we do.

What Is Needed

There is no moment in all of life in which we must be more diligent to hear and obey the Word of God in Scripture as when we are calling on another person or group to do the same. We tend to be self-righteous at the best of times. But we are especially self-righteous when we embark on a crusade. At times we must indeed disobey. Caesar is not God, and

though we must render to Caesar what is Caesar's, we must be careful to give God what is God's. May God give us grace to know the difference.

Chapter 201.
The Power of the Sword

Romans 13:3-4

We are studying the Christian doctrine of the state—that is, of God-ordained government—and we come in this study to a word that in our day is often on people's tongues: *power.* Everyone is interested in power. We want to have power over our own lives. We speak about empowering people. We refer to power trips. Men buy power ties. Even the church is into power, so much so that recently a book called *Power Religion* appeared to oppose this sad trend.

The reason we come to power now is that it emerges in Romans 13 as a second reason why Christians should submit to the secular authorities. We examined the first reason in our study of verse 2: God has established them, so if we resist those who have been raised up to govern us, we are resisting God and God will judge us accordingly. The second reason we should obey is that the state will judge us too. That is, we will get in trouble because the state has *power* to enforce its decrees and laws.

Paul expressed this idea by writing, "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:3-4). In these verses the power of government is expressed by the symbol of a sword.

Government by Force

Power of the sword means force. This is what the state has been given by God, and it is the very basis for how the state conducts its affairs.

We do not like to think about this very much, because forcing someone to do something is not supposed to be good in our "free" society. Think of raising children, for example. Most people today think it is bad to force children to do anything. So instead of saying, "Make your bed" or "Eat your dinner or else," we give them options, presenting the good as "being in their best interest," or offering them rewards instead of punishments. We say, "Would you rather eat your dinner now or for breakfast?" or even "Would you rather eat your potatoes or your spinach first?" Even as adults we often bristle as soon as someone says that we have to do something.

Because of this cultural mind-set, whenever we think of government, especially if it is one we favor, we refuse to think of it as existing or operating by force. Instead we think of it as giving moral guidance and appealing to the best in its people while providing an environment for selffulfillment or expression. We will admit that totalitarian systems like the former communist states of Eastern Europe operated by force. That is what was wrong with them, we think. But we suppose that our government must be different—or at least we hope it is.

But it is not! "Kinder and gentler" perhaps, its cast-iron fist hidden by a velvet glove. But it too is based on force, for the simple reason that every government is based on force. That is the nature of governments. There is no other way in which they can operate.

For example, we have a system of so-called voluntary self-assessment of income tax in this country. When you fill out your form each April you can read on the front of the tax booklet that we are a country unique in the world in that each year millions of Americans "voluntarily" assess their own tax and "voluntarily" pay those billions of dollars that keep the government running. How wonderful—"voluntary self-assessment." But it is not truly voluntary, of course. If you refuse to pay your income tax, you will be billed for the deficient amount, plus

interest. And if you refuse to pay even then, you will be arrested and your assets seized to pay the delinquent taxes.

Paying taxes is not voluntary at all. It is mandatory, and the proof that it is mandatory is the government's final use of force to accomplish its objectives.

Let me give you another example. Suppose you are a businessman who is becoming bogged down by the increasing number of government laws regulating your business. You have so many areas in which you need to comply and so many forms to fill out that you decide that you just will not fill them out this year. What will happen? The government will close your business and possibly even arrest you.

In this study I want to explore the areas in which this power, given to the state by God, is to operate. But before I do that, let me note that the right to enforce laws by force is a right given to the state and not the church. When Jesus was tried by Pilate he acknowledged Pilate's authority over him, which included the right even to put him to death. But Jesus did not claim that power for himself or his followers. When questioned about his kingdom, he replied that his kingdom was a kingdom of truth: "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).

The church has always gotten into trouble when it has tried to take the state's power—that is, force—into its own hands. The church tried to do this in the Middle Ages, after Christianity had been embraced by Constantine as the religion of the empire. But the result was disastrous for the church. The leaders of the church became power hungry, true religion diminished, and corruption increased.

Religious leaders make bad rulers, because secular power seems to corrupt them even more than it corrupts secular rulers. Therefore, the power of the sword has been given to Caesar, not the church, and it must not be used to advance the cause of Christ. Caesar alone has the right to cut off heads.

Civil and Social Order

Nevertheless, when we say that the power of the sword has been given to the state, we do not mean that this power can be exercised in any way whatsoever, or that the state can do by the exercise of power what the church alone is able to do by its proclamation of the gospel and the truth. Let's look at each of these.

1. *The state's power, however legitimate it may be when used in the areas for which God has given it, cannot be exercised in any way whatsoever.* The state has no God-given right to massacre its citizens, for instance. It has no right to use its power to advance evil. Paul makes this clear in Romans 13:3-4, when he speaks repeatedly of those who do good and those who do evil, and of the state's exercise of its power to reward those who do the one and punish those who do the other.

How, then, is the power of the sword to be used? First, the state is given power to defend its citizens from both enemies outside the state and evildoers within. It has power to wage war, including all necessary powers that go with it: power to conscript its people into the armed forces, power to tax for the war effort, power to redirect the nation's economy to a wartime footing. These are legitimate powers, but they are justified only by the need for the common defense. The power to regulate the economy in order to wage war does not necessarily carry over into peacetime, for example.

The state also has power to defend its citizens from evildoers within. That is, it has been given responsibility to provide and maintain social order. The biblical writers seem to have been particularly concerned about this, probably because they were more aware than most of us of how terrible anarchy can be. Nobody is safe in such times, so even a bad government is to be preferred to chaos. That is one reason why we are told to pray even for evil rulers. Paul told Timothy, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made *for everyone*—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Social order is good by itself, but it is particularly good for Christians because it gives us an opportunity to advance the gospel.

The church can remind the authorities of this good role and urge them to it. John Calvin said, "Magistrates may learn from this the nature of their calling. They are not to rule on their own account, but for the public good. Nor do they have unbridled power, but power that is restricted to the welfare of their subjects."

The second area in which government has been given power by God is in establishing, exercising, and maintaining justice—that is, in rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. This is what Paul chiefly has in mind in these verses when he says, "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

There are two matters here, each enormously important now. First, a conviction that there are such things as good and evil is critical. For when Paul says that the state has been given power to punish evil, he is assuming a moral standard to which not only the individual citizen but also the state must conform. In other words, the state should reward what is good and punish what is evil, but in order to do that the state must know what the good is, and for that there must be an objective moral standard outside itself, either discovered by it or given to it.

This is extremely relevant today because American law has gone through a revolution in this area. John W. Whitehead has written a book about this called *The Second American Revolution.* This revolution Whitehead is writing about is the current rejection of rule by law that is objective and unchanging for a malleable sociological law that can be determined by the jurists.

Let me explain. In 1907 Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes expressed the sociological understanding of law for the first time officially when he said, "The Constitution is what the judges say it is." He meant that the justices are not bound by an absolute law. Instead, they are free to find whatever they want in the law and even to change it. So there is no appeal beyond what the Supreme Court decides, even if it is contrary to what the Constitution or any other laws meant years ago.

When the Constitution was written, however, its authors intended something very different. They meant that law was supreme. Therefore, ours was to be a country governed by laws and not by men, even Supreme Court justices. This idea came into American jurisprudence from the Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford and his monumental work *Lex Rex*, meaning "law is king," and through such figures as the English jurist William Blackstone, who worked it into English common law, and John Witherspoon, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, who worked it into our Constitution.

Incidentally, it is only because the colonists believed in an absolute law to which even magistrates were responsible that they judged themselves right to rebel against England. It was because King George had violated the rights of "life and liberty," which had been given to them by "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," that they rebelled.

The points here are that the state's ability to act justly depends upon absolute law and that this approach to the state's authority is the only genuinely Christian one. Apart from this everything becomes relative, the possibility of achieving equal justice for all is eventually destroyed, and the citizens become subject to the changing whims of their judges.

2. *The state cannot reform evildoers by power.* The power of the sword has been given to the state to defend its citizens and to punish wrongdoing only. Or, to put it in other words, the state has a God-given responsibility to punish bad or evil behavior, but it has no authority—and even less power—to actually change or reform the evildoer.

No one has seen this with greater clarity or expressed it with greater insight than C. S. Lewis in an essay called "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment." In this essay Lewis distinguishes between the old idea of retributive justice, in which a person who has done something bad is punished in accordance with what he or she has done, and the humanitarian idea of justice, in which the person is disciplined in order to reform him.

The first is based on "desert," to use the old word for it. It means that the murderer is given a longer time in jail than the petty thief because the first is a greater crime and the murderer deserves a greater punishment. The second is based on what someone thinks might help or cure the criminal.

Our system is a mixture, of course. Jail sentences are proportionate to the degree of crimes involved. But we also mitigate these on the basis of whether a prisoner is well-behaved or, in the case of crime judged to flow from mental illness, whether the person is cured. We see a practical expression of the second idea in the fact that we call our prisons penitentiaries—places where people are to do penance—or reformatories—places where they can be reformed.

Lewis argues that, although the humanitarian view seems compassionate and thus enlightened (it claims to want only the well-being of the criminal), it is actually cruel, for several reasons.

First, it takes determination of the nature and length of the penalty out of the hands of judges, who affix it for all according to an objective legal standard, and places it in the hands of psychological experts who alone may determine when the criminal is well.

Second, it debases the person involved. Instead of being a responsible moral agent, capable of doing wrong but also capable of paying a proper punishment for it, the criminal becomes a thing to be worked upon by the experts until he is "well" by their definition. This is what was done in the Soviet Union to political prisoners, for example.

And that leads to the third reason. Lewis writes, "If crime and disease are to be regarded as the same thing, it follows that any state of mind which our masters choose to call 'disease' can be treated as crime; and compulsorily cured." That should be of concern to Christians, if to no one else, because Christianity has never been popular, and in the name of curing our "antisocial" or "humanity-hating" beliefs or actions, any government that is powerful enough could lock us up until we are "cured" ideologically.

Of course, what Romans 13 is saying is that the state has no business trying to cure people, only that it is mandated by God to punish bad behavior and reward good actions. Therefore, the state must have a standard of right and wrong, and it must administer that standard impartially. That is all government really can do in the long run.

Where Are God's People?

Two final points are needed to round out this picture of government and its proper use of power:

1. *Government cannot develop morality.* Government can only punish; it cannot develop morality in its citizens. The important word in that statement is *develop,* of course. For I am not saying that government is not to be concerned with morality. On the contrary, morality is precisely what it is to be concerned with, for morality is the only true basis for law.

For example, if the government passes a law against stealing and enforces it with the power of the sword, the only valid basis for the law and the penalty affixed for breaking it is that stealing is wrong. Or to put it another way, there is a God-given right to private property. If stealing is not wrong, then the act of government to oppose it and punish it is tyranny—an unjustifiable restriction of freedom. If stealing is wrong, then the government is acting properly. It is the same with all laws. The only valid basis for any law is a previously existing morality.

To give another example, in the case of capital punishment the only valid base for the right of the government to take a life of one who has

taken the life of another is Genesis 9:6, which says that the murderer may be killed because he has killed one made "in the image of God." This means that his act was a violation of the law of God and an offense to God.

Nevertheless, this valid concern for morality does not mean that the government can develop morality in its citizens, for it cannot. It can proscribe penalties. It can enforce them and thus perhaps also restrain evil somewhat. But it cannot change the people involved.

A case in point was Prohibition. Government outlawed traffic in alcoholic beverages. But although the trade was restricted a bit, the sale of alcohol nevertheless flourished, and it erupted into a storm as soon as Prohibition was repealed.

2. *Morality comes from revealed religion.* If government cannot develop morality in its citizens, then morality must come in another way and from another source. What can that source be? Where can morality come from? There is only one answer. It comes from revealed religion, and it must work its way into national life through those citizens who know and sincerely desire to please God.

Religious people are, therefore, the best asset a country can have and the only thing that will advance it in the direction of justice and true righteousness. So today the need is not for more laws. If we do not have a moral citizenry, even the laws can be used immorally. They can be used to get out of paying one's debts, escape a prison sentence, cheat the innocent, oppress the poor, and many such things. What we need are people who know and are willing to live by the moral laws of God.

Remember 2 Chronicles 7:14. That great Old Testament text does not offer healing for a nation through the election of a better president or the ouster of an old one. It does not even recommend passing better laws. It proscribes renewal through the repentance of God's people: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Chapter 202.
Because of Conscience

Romans 13:5

One of the greatest delights of studying the Bible carefully, as all of us should do, is that we frequently come upon unexpected but very wonderful things.

For example, the account of God's creation of the heavenly bodies in Genesis 1 reads: "And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.' And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. *He also made the stars*" (Gen. 1:14-16). "He also made the stars!"

What an amazing, unexpected and utterly understated line—"Oh, yes, and also the billions of blazing stars, supernovas, black holes, galaxies and quasars. That, too." I remember that Malcolm Muggeridge called those five words one of the greatest "throw-away lines" in literary history.

And Don't Forget Conscience

There is something like that in the verse we come to in this study, particularly in the word with which it ends: "conscience."

Paul is writing about the proper function of government and why Christians should be exemplary in their submission to its legitimate authority. There are two reasons, and they are both powerful. First, we should submit to the governing authorities because "the authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Rom. 13:1-2). That is, if we resist the state, we are resisting God and God will judge

us. The second reason, which we examined in the last study, is that the state will judge us too. "If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing" (v. 4). The state will insist that we obey it and will punish us if we do not.

Here are two good reasons for submitting to the civil government. But then, just when we think
Paul has made his point thoroughly and is about to wrap up, he adds almost as an afterthought, "Oh, yes, and also because of conscience." The full verse says, "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."

I call this an understatement, or a throw-away line compared to "he also made the stars," because conscience is not a small thing of little importance but rather a large thing of very great importance. Conscience involves our sense of what is right and wrong and, even more importantly, our awareness that we ought to do what is right. In other words, when Paul speaks of conscience, as he does here, he suddenly lifts the discussion of submission to the governing authorities from what we might call a merely pragmatic level to the highest possible plane. For now, instead of saying, "You should obey the state because you will get in trouble if you don't," he says, "You should obey the state because that is the right thing to do, and you know you should do what is right."

Let me say this another way. Instead of treating us as we might treat an animal, training it to respond mechanically by rewarding desired behavior and punishing undesirable behavior, Paul treats people as responsible moral agents—that is, as human beings made in God's image—by appealing to our consciences.

What Is the Conscience?

The conscience seems to have been more important to Paul than to any other biblical writer. In the New International Version of the Bible the word *conscience* occurs twenty-nine times, but only four of those

occurrences are in the Old Testament. Twenty-five are in the New Testament, and twenty of those are in Paul's speeches or writings, quite a few being in 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Aside from Paul's use of the word, there are in addition only three occurrences in Hebrews and two in 1 Peter.

The word *conscience* is composed of two Latin words: *con*, meaning with, and *scientia*, meaning knowledge. So conscience means "with knowledge." Specifically, it has to do with knowledge of one's heart or inner motivations as contrasted with one's actions.

This is the way the word normally appears in English literature. But because we are sinners and know ourselves to be sinners, "conscience" usually is employed in a negative way as something that condemns us. For example, in *Richard III,* Richard, who was a very evil king, says:

> My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, And every tongue brings in a several tale, And every tale condemns me for a villain.
>
> Richard III, Act 5, Scene 3

The word is used the same way in *Hamlet.* Referring to the play that Hamlet uses to expose the king's treacherous murder of his father, Hamlet says:

> The play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.
>
> Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2 In Paradise Lost John Milton says of Satan:
>
> Now conscience wakes despair
> That slumber'd, wakes the bitter memory Of what he was, what is, and what must be.
>
> Paradise Lost, Book 4, Line 23

These uses of the word, and others like them, are mostly negative, and with reason. We are guilty of many offenses and our consciences usually condemn us.

But now consider Paul's use of the word. Paul is aware that a person's conscience can be weak (1
Cor. 8:7, 10, 12), and he knows that our consciences can condemn us, since he speaks of striving "always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16). But generally Paul speaks of a "good conscience" (1 Tim. 1:5, 19) and a "clear conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:3). He told the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day" (Acts 23:1). To the Corinthians he wrote, "Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God" (2 Cor. 1:12). Again, "By setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2).

There is an enormous difference here between the use of *conscience* by secular writers and its characteristic biblical use. The reason is that God has quickened the Christian's moral nature so that he or she not only knows what is right as opposed to what is wrong but also has been given a true desire and ability to do what conscience demands.

What This Means for Government

But we are talking about the role of conscience as it applies to the Christian's relationship to civil government, not to moral matters in general. So we need to ask what is involved here when Paul says, "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."

1. *We have a higher motive for obeying than others have.* Paul's main point in this section is that Christians are to obey the secular authorities, and the first reason he has given is that God has established human governments. That is something that Christians can alone fully appreciate. But even this can appeal to a low motivation if all we mean by it is that God will punish those who disobey the civil governments he has set up. However, when Paul brings in the matter of the conscience, he is saying also that we

must obey because obedience is right and because, being responsible moral agents, we ought to do the right thing.

In adding this standard Paul also raises our significance as responsible agents and tells us that what we do really matters. Paul is telling us that our obedience to the secular authorities matters, and that this is a very good reason why we should be careful to do it. It matters to God, of course. He cares whether or not you obey him. But it also matters to society. If you take obedience to the laws of the country lightly—if you say, "Well, everyone is doing it" or "They're crazy laws anyway" or "It's not my law; I didn't write it or vote for it"—if you do that, then you are contributing to a spirit of lawlessness that will issue in anarchy and eventually lead to the loss of civil liberties and to a dictatorial government. On the other hand, if you obey the laws of the land, you will be contributing to society by helping to sustain a stable and liberty-respecting government.

One of the great tragedies of our country today is that many people have little or no respect for authority and therefore feel free to break any laws that seem inconvenient to them. So civil disorder is rising. The police are unable to contain the disorder. The courts are overworked, and the nation's prisons are overflowing.

2. *We have a stronger reason for disobeying when disobedience becomes necessary.* I pointed out in an earlier study that there are limits to the authority that has been granted civil government. This is because authority by its very nature is "given," in this case God-given, and the one given governmental authority is therefore responsible to God. The government has no right to forbid the free exercise or propagation of religion. No secular ruler has the right to violate the Ten Commandments or force others to do so. The government has no right to compel Christians to commit unjust acts or to act contrary to an informed Christian conscience.

But that is the important point here. Conscience! A Christian should have an enlightened moral conscience because he should know the Word of God, and because he possesses the Holy Spirit to help him

understand it Also, because he has a new nature the Christian should have a stronger desire to exercise that conscience rightly. A secular ruler might know a right course of action but decide not to pursue it simply because it might be inconvenient, not in his own selfish interests, opposed by his friends, or for any other number of reasons.

The Christian cannot think this way. Therefore, regardless of whether an action is convenient, personally advantageous, or popular, the Christian ought to pursue the right course of action.

This means that a Christian will stand against the state when it does wrong, regardless of the consequences. The world may say, "You'll never get ahead if you do that." But the Christian will ask not whether the position is advantageous or popular, but whether the position itself is right and will act accordingly. Governments have often been wrong. Our own government is frequently wrong. Christians will stand against those wrong actions and for the right "because of conscience."

The Exercise of Conscience

As soon as I write that "our own government is frequently wrong" I am sure I stir up defensive reactions in some people, and many will ask for examples.

1. *Abortion.* Most evangelical people think of abortion when we think of the government being wrong, and we are dismayed that the Clinton administration favors the right of abortion on demand. We believe abortion is wrong because the fetus is not "tissue," as the pro-choice forces like to think of it, but a tiny human being. We believe abortion is murder and that God will not hold us guiltless for the murder of more than a million and a half babies every year.

What are we to do about it? We are to protest it, of course, explaining our position and arguing our case. I have already pointed out that we will get nowhere if all we do is adopt the world's methodology—sit-ins and pressure tactics and more laws. The world will use that against us, and has. Instead, we need to explain that the only view of mankind that

protects us from exploitation by tyrannical rulers or others is that we are made in the image of God and are therefore valuable to God, even in an embryonic state. We need to show that the disenfranchising of the unborn child is no different than the once-popular defense of slavery by calling blacks less than human or the murder of Jews by calling them a threat to society. We must show that human beings are *all* made in God's image and therefore must not be destroyed for anyone's convenience, even that of the mother.

2. *Pornography.* We have a strong and valuable tradition of the right of free speech and free expression in this country, and it is something we do not want to lose. We do not want to take away people's right to express their opinions in print or by graphic media. But no freedom is utterly without limits. Someone said, "Your freedom ends where my nose begins." So when we deal with pornography we need to say that freedom to print sexually obscene material stops at the point at which it harms others.

And it does harm others. Defenders of the pornography industry deny this, of course, just as makers of cigarettes deny that cigarettes cause lung cancer, emphysema, and other lung-related illnesses. But in this case, it is our job to show that pornography really is harmful. We need to document our case. We need to remind people that Ted Bundy, who in 1989 was executed for multiple serial murders of young women in Florida and elsewhere, said on death row that the chief contributing influence to his violent murderous course was pornography. We need to highlight the Federal Bureau of Investigation report that convincingly links pornography to sexrelated murders and the study of the Michigan State Police that linked pornography to 40 percent of its assault cases.

The Reverend Donald E. Wildmon has been making this case through the American Family Association (formerly the National Federation for Decency), which he has directed since its founding in 1977.

What can one person do, or even a group of persons? I can tell you what one man did. His name is Jack Eckerd, and when he became a Christian in 1983 he decided that selling *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines in his

extensive drugstore chain was displeasing to God. He called his company's president and told him that he wanted the pornographic magazines removed from all seventeen hundred Eckerd drugstores. The president protested because the sales brought in millions of dollars for the firm, but Eckerd persisted and won. He owned the stores.

Moreover, his action caused something of a chain reaction. One by one Revco, Peoples, RiteAid, Dart Drug, Grey Drug, and High's Dairy Stores followed Eckerd's lead. The last hold-out was 7-Eleven, which in 1986 finally removed pornography from all forty-five hundred of its stores and recommended that its thirty-six hundred franchises do the same. All this happened without a single law being passed. Why? Because of conscience.

3. *Gun control.* It is incredible to me that there are so few serious actions being taken in our country to control the use of guns, particularly since scores of people are being shot in America every single hour. Our papers and television news shows are full of the stories. The reason why there is so little action is the powerful gun lobby. It argues that the right to bear arms is guaranteed by our Constitution, and that is right. But the Constitution does not mean that we cannot insist on licensing guns, just as we license cars, or that we cannot ban the use of some guns in the same way we do not allow people to drive tanks or armored personnel carriers on our highways. We should not allow felons to own guns.

People argue that criminals will get guns anyway; we cannot stop them. But that is irrelevant. Of course, they will. But when they are caught with an unlicensed gun, they need to be prosecuted for that. Yet this is not my chief concern. My concern is not with the specific laws to be passed. I am not in the business of writing laws. What I am calling for is an outpouring of conscience in the matter of gun availability and the mushrooming of gun-caused murders. The Christian's task is to cry out against the evil and not stop crying until something is done about it.

4. *Public schools.* And what about the public schools? I am not insisting here that prayers and Bible readings ought to be

> reinstated. Many Christians doubt that is a good idea. My concern is with the education itself. In many schools education is not even happening. And even where it does happen, it happens in an ethical environment that is destructive of character and even sound citizenship. People who have values should not be forced to submit to this system. They should be free to create other options and not be penalized even financially by having to pay for their own systems while at the same time being required to support the disasters that pass for schools in their communities.

Our task should be to expose the failures and encourage alternatives, even good secular ones. We need to defend everybody, not just our own interests. We need to call for voucher systems or something like them.

Conscience and the Word of God

This is far from a full social agenda for the Christian community but only an example of the function of Christian conscience in our world.

But let me caution that one of our great dangers as Christians is pride, and by that I mean that we easily assume that only our consciences have been enlightened and that we alone have the right answers. We do not. We need to listen to others, particularly well-informed non-Christians. And we need to remember that our consciences are valuable only when they are themselves enlightened by the written Word of God.

One writer has compared the human conscience to a sundial. It is not a perfect timepiece, but it is fairly accurate—as long as the sun is shining on it. Suppose you consult it by moonlight. In that case, it might tell any time at all. It might say that it is noon when it is actually three o'clock in the morning. The sundial is only valuable when the sun is shining on it. In the same manner, the conscience is only valuable when it is illuminated by the Word of God. We need people who will stand for the right and do the right "because of conscience." But if you start a crusade, be sure the position you take is biblical and that you are not merely serving yourself or enhancing your own crusading reputation.

Chapter 203.
To Each His Due

Romans 13:6-7

No one likes to pay taxes or, for that matter, thinks very charitably about tax collectors. Yet that is the point at which Paul's treatment of the rights of civil government and a Christian's responsibility to it end. We are to pay our taxes and in every other way rightly honor those who are in authority over us, even tax collectors.

When we analyze what this means we find that these last two verses of Paul's teaching about the Christian and his or her relationship to civil government have two parts. The first part says we need to pay taxes. The second part is about showing respect and giving honor to those who deserve respect and who should be shown honor. The verses say, "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Rom. 13:6-7).

No One Likes to Pay Taxes

This is hard to do. The famous French philosopher and author François Voltaire was having a dinner party with two of his witty friends, and he suggested that they entertain themselves by each improvising a story about thieves. His two friends each told an amusing story and was praised for it. It was then Voltaire's turn. "Gentlemen," he said, "there was once a tax collector.... Good Lord, I've forgotten the rest of the story."

Victor Amadeus, the Duke of Savoy who became King of Sicily and later King of Sardinia, taxed his subjects severely. Once he stopped a working man and asked how he was getting along. "About as well as things can go in a holy land like ours," he answered.

"Holy land?" said Amadeus. "I don't understand."

"Well, we must be a holy land because here the Passion of our Savior repeats itself, only in reverse."

"Reverse?"

"Yes," said the peasant. "In those olden days One died for all. Here all of us die for one."

Supporting Government through Taxes

There are probably a hundred stories like these because no one likes to pay taxes. Yet in Romans 13:6-7 Paul joins with Jesus in saying that this is one important responsibility of a Christian. A Christian is to support his government by paying taxes.

The reason, of course, is that government is expensive and we benefit by it in countless ways, even if we have a bad government. In his commentary on Romans, Ray Stedman, the former senior minister of the Peninsula Bible Church near San Francisco, tells how when he was first a minister he made so little money that for years he didn't have to pay any taxes at all and that it came as a shock to him when one year he finally had to do so. He resented it. So when he mailed in his tax return that year he addressed it to "The *Infernal* Revenue Service." That didn't seem to bother the tax collectors. They took his money anyway. The next year he addressed it to "The *Eternal* Revenue Service," but that didn't bother them either. After that he gave up and settled into the same resigned attitude that most of us have for at least the first two weeks in April every year.

But resignation is not the right attitude. Rather, when we pay our federal taxes we should be thankful for the armed forces those taxes support and for the peace and national security we enjoy because of them. Taxes support the courts and numerous federal agencies from which we benefit. We have national parks, federal drug enforcement agencies, food inspectors, the center for infectious diseases, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, air traffic controllers, and other indispensable services. When we pay our state taxes we should be thankful for the state's funding of universities, some city services, maintenance of state

highways, and the courts. City taxes fund schools, garbage collection, firefighters, and police.

We may complain about taxes, but without them government could not function, civilization would be impossible, and our lives and property would be in jeopardy every moment of every day.

Responsible Taxation

But although the state's authority and power are from God and are therefore to be respected, the state is nevertheless responsible to God for what it does with that power. This is true in the area of taxation also.

1. *A responsible use of taxed money.* One limitation on government in the area of taxation is that taxes are not to be used merely to increase the luxury and elevate the lifestyle of our governors. This is clear from the way Paul sets down these verses. For when he says that "the authorities are God's servants," he is saying that government officials are to use our taxes to serve the people and not to enrich themselves.

John Calvin expressed this well in his commentary:

Paul takes the opportunity of mentioning tributes, and he bases his reason for paying taxes on the office of the magistrates. If it is their responsibility to defend and preserve uninjured the peace of the upright and to resist the impious attempts of the wicked, they cannot do this unless they are assisted by force and strong protection. Tributes, therefore, are paid by law to support such necessities.... It is right, however, that they should remember that all that they receive from the people is public property, and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury.

We do not see abuses of this nature very much among the highest elected officials in our country because presidents, senators, and congressmen are under intense public scrutiny, and abuses in this area can be detected and used against them politically. Abuses that are too flagrant will result in their being put out of office at the next election.

However, we do have much abuse of public monies further down the scale. We see featherbedding of government agencies, far more people being employed than are necessary to do the job. We see bloated budgets and sometimes outright graft or the placing of family members on the payroll to do nonexistent jobs. Many abuses occur at the level of city government, and from time to time these bring even the largest and most prosperous cities to the brink of bankruptcy.

2. *Confiscatory taxation.* The second abuse about which the government needs to be especially on guard is confiscatory taxation, which means making taxes so high that the government is, in effect, stealing from its people and thus eventually ruining both itself and the country.

This is a tremendous danger, and it is one the founders and early leaders of our country recognized. In fact, it is why they insisted on "no taxation without representation" in the struggles with England that led to the War of Independence. Our forefathers recognized that representative government is the only safeguard against having one's possessions at the mercy of a king or any other strong ruler, and they were willing to venture their lives and sacred honor for that safeguard. One of our earliest chief justices, John Marshall, said, "The power to tax is the power to destroy." Another justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, expressed this same concern from the point of view of prohibiting destructive tax legislation. He said, "The power to tax [will not be] the power to destroy while this court sits."

This is a difficult area, of course. For it is like asking, "When is long too long?" or "When is short too short?" Those are relative terms, and everything depends on the objects involved and the circumstances.

When are taxes too much? That depends on the condition of the economy and of the world. In a robust economy taxation can be higher as the state uses its higher share of taxes to do more to develop the country and enrich people's lives. In times when people are struggling just to make ends meet, the government has to ease up. Greater taxation is required in times of war than when the country is at peace. In peacetime there really should be something like a "peace dividend," as

there was after World War II. It should not be an open door for the state merely to spend more on government programs.

What about the graded income tax? Is that just? No, of course it is not just. We speak of the rich paying their "fair" share. But fairness is the one thing that cannot be said of taking more taxes from those who make more. Fairness would require that we tax everyone equally. Taxing the rich more may be expedient. It may be the only place money can be found in recessionary times or in a failing economy. But it is not just, and in the long run it hurts the national economy since accumulated capital is the only source of funding for new business projects. When the government taxes the rich excessively it mortgages the future for short-term economic gain.

Today spending by our national government is out of control. Most of our elected officials lack courage to stop the excess and reduce the federal budget, not to mention the escalating deficit. Some officials actually want to spend more.

Let me make a radical proposal. Under our system those who do well by making more money are penalized. They are taxed more than others. Shouldn't there be a system under which, if you make more money (or at least if you develop or control a business that makes more money), you should be rewarded? Wouldn't we see greater prosperity if, when people made more, taxes for those people actually went down? In one of Jesus' parables the servant who invested the ten talents he had in order to make ten more was rewarded by being given ten cities, and the man who increased his five talents by adding five more talents was given five cities. As for the man who had been given one talent but failed to use it, his talent was taken away from him and given to the man who had ten! (Luke 19:11-27).

Respect and Honor

How government should conduct itself in the area of taxation was not Paul's concern, of course. He was concerned about how Christians are to function. So at this point he broadens his words from taxes to talk

about proper respect and honor. "Give everyone what you owe him," he says, adding after taxes, "if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." This verse is a bridge to the next section of Romans, in which Paul writes about loving one another, because honor should be shown to many kinds of people and not only to government officials.

A quick look through a concordance brings out several categories of those we are to honor.

1. *The king.* We have been studying a Christian's responsibility to those exercising civic responsibilities, so a good place to start is with the Bible's commands to "honor the king" and all who, like him, are in high positions of authority. In words that are very close to Paul's, Peter writes:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, *honor the king.*

1 Peter 2:13-17

When Paul was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin he spoke of having fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience, and at that point the high priest ordered those standing near him to strike him on the mouth because they thought his words were arrogant. Paul knew this was illegal under Jewish law since he had not been convicted of anything. So he replied, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck" (Acts 23:3).

Those who were standing by rebuked Paul for talking so disrespectfully to the high priest. Paul then replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he

was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people'" (v. 5). The quotation is from Exodus 22:28.

We honor the king and those who are over us by refusing to speak of them disrespectfully, and we exercise a genuinely Christian responsibility toward them by praying for them. This includes officials of our city government as well as federal officials, police, firefighters, and schoolteachers.

2. *Church officers.* There are a number of verses that tell us to honor those who have been given authority in the churches. Paul told Timothy, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are *worthy of double honor,* especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). The author of Hebrews wrote of church leaders, "*Obey your leaders and submit* to their authority" (Heb. 13:17).

Again, there are helpful biblical examples of this. When Aaron led the people into idolatry by making the golden calf and Moses came down the mountain to the camp to punish the offenders, Moses did not dishonor Aaron publicly. He demanded to know what he had done. Aaron gave a lame excuse, blaming Moses for taking so long on the mountain, the people for their stiffnecked ways, and even magical circumstances, claiming that all he had done was throw the people's gold into the furnace and the calf had come out. Moses understood these excuses and lies for what they were, but he did not rebuke Aaron since Aaron had been appointed by God and it was for God to rebuke or remove him, not Moses. Moses seems to have let the interrogation of Aaron drop at this point (Exod. 32:21-24).

On the other side we have the story of Miriam, Moses' sister, who opposed Moses because he had married a Cushite woman—that is, probably a black woman. Moses did not defend himself, but God heard and punished Miriam with leprosy. It is a serious thing to speak or work against those whom God has appointed to positions of church authority.

3. *Parents.* The Ten Commandments contain another verse about those we are to honor, our parents. "*Honor your father and your mother,* so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12). Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 6:2, noting that it is "the first commandment with a promise."

This is an important command and rightly heads the list of those on the second table of the law, commands expressing our duty toward other people. It is first because the family is the smallest unit of society and respect for family members, particularly parents, is foundational to family order and discipline. Children should be taught to respect their parents and should be punished if they do not. Because if we teach children to obey their parents, when they grow up they will be able to respect and obey others—teachers, policemen, magistrates, and God. We need to speak kindly to our parents, listen to their opinions, remember their birthdays, and care for them in their old age. If we do not respect our parents, whom we can see, how will we be able to respect and obey God, whom we cannot see?

4. *Older persons.* Leviticus is a difficult book, but it is filled with many important verses, and one of them is this: "Rise in the presence of the aged, *show respect for the elderly* and revere your God" (Lev. 19:32). How little we do that today! Instead of respecting older people we often despise them, thinking instead that the only people of value are the young. "Never trust anyone over thirty," they said in the sixties—but the sixties was not a decade of great wisdom.

5. *God.* If we are called to honor people who are in authority over us because of their appointments to office, because they are our parents, or because of their age, we obviously also need to respect and honor God. First Timothy 6:16 says of God the Father, "*To him be honor* and might forever. Amen." Similarly, John 5:22-23 says, "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, *that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.* He

who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him."

How do we honor God? We do it by studying his Word that we may come to know him. When we discover something in his Word that he requires of us, we honor him by doing what he has commanded. We honor him by thanking him for all he has given and by praising him for all he is in and of himself. We honor God by trusting him through all the many trials and disappointments of life. We honor him by praising him as the source of whatever good may be found in us or whatever good we may do in this life.

We remember that in that wonderful scene in Revelation, when the saints stand before God represented by the twenty-four elders.

They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

Revelation 4:10-11

It is the elders' way of showing that anything they have accomplished has been accomplished by the grace of God and by him only. So they give their crowns to God and praise him.

The Character of Citizens

It is only as Christian people capture the high ground of doing what they do for the honor and glory of God that they can be used of God to elevate society to where those who deserve honor are given honor and those who deserve respect are given respect. And it is only when that happens that a nation becomes morally strong and justice becomes a reality and not just a hollow word. In other words, a nation does not become strong by laws but by the character of its citizens.

The former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was an unusual politician in that she understood the limits of government and called for

its renewal by people able to live a life of true faith. Addressing the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, she said, "The truths of the Judaic-Christian tradition are infinitely precious, not only, as I believe, because they are true, but also because they provide the moral impulse which alone can lead to that peace... for which we all long.... There is little hope for democracy if the hearts of men and women in democratic societies cannot be touched by a call to something greater than themselves. Political structures, state institutions, collective ideals are not enough. We parliamentarians can legislate for the rule of law. You, the church, can teach the life of faith."

The wonderful thing about this is that if we begin by showing respect to those to whom respect is due and honor to those to whom honor is due, above all showing honor and respect to God, then others may learn something of God through us and eventually come to respect, honor, and love him too, which is salvation and the beginning of wisdom. "To each his due" is not only a word about taxes. It is about justice too, and about the foundation of a free and just society.

Part Nineteen. The Law of Love

Chapter 204.
Debt and How to Get Out of It

Romans 13:8

Romans 13:8 begins a new section of Paul's letter in which Paul turns from the way believers are to relate to the governing authorities to how they are to treat other people in general. Our text is an effective transition, because it picks up on verse 7 ("Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor") and bridges to the ongoing Christian responsibility to love other people.

Verse 8 says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law."

Borrowing or Failing to Repay?

The King James Version began this verse a bit differently: "Owe no man any thing" ("Owe no one anything," RSV). This is a literal translation of the Greek. But the New International Version is closer to the actual meaning when it says, "Let no debt remain outstanding," because the Bible does not forbid borrowing. Jesus assumed the right to borrow in Matthew 5:42, when he said, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Other texts assume this also (see Exod. 22:25; Ps. 37:26; Luke 6:35). The point of Romans 13:8 is not that Christians should never borrow, but that they should never leave their debts unpaid. As Leon Morris points out, being a present imperative, the verb even has a continuous force: "Don't continue owing. Pay your debts."

John Murray says, "This cannot be taken to mean that we may never incur financial obligations.... But it does condemn the looseness with which we contract debts and particularly the indifference so often displayed in the discharging of them."

The difference between borrowing under certain circumstances and failure to repay what is borrowed can be illustrated as follows. Suppose you are renting a house. You do not own the house. You are only benefiting from it through the willingness of the owner to rent it to you. All you owe is the rent. In this case, the words of our text, "Let no debt remain outstanding," mean that you are to pay the rent on time. Suppose now that you need to borrow capital for a business. The situation is exactly the same. You do not own the capital. All you are doing is renting it through the willingness of the owner to loan it to you. What you owe is the interest—plus the repayment of the capital on whatever schedule has been agreed upon between you and the lender. There is no sin in borrowing the money as long as you are able to pay the interest and premiums according to that schedule.

America: A Debtor Nation

But the problem for many Americans, including our government, is that debt financing has become a way of life, and those who borrow are frequently enticed, misled, or trapped into borrowing more than they are able to repay. Then they default on their payments and often escape the weight of their financial obligations by declaring personal bankruptcy. Bankruptcy means cheating the person or company that has lent the money, and it is an unjust and impermissible course of action for a Christian. It is at this point that Romans 13:8 speaks most forcefully to people today when it says, "Let no debt remain outstanding."

The United States began to go into serious debt only after World War II. Before that we were living within our means. Income paid for the debt on bonds, inflation was negligible, and the country had a positive balance of trade. Today our national debt has passed $4 trillion. None of us really knows how much $1 million is, let alone $1 billion or $1 trillion. Breaking it down may help: $4 trillion dollars is $16,000 for every man, woman, and child in the United States ($4 trillion divided by 250 million). If we wanted to pay this debt off, we would first have to stop going into debt, which our leaders are unwilling or unable to do. (They are actually increasing the debt at an accelerating rate, rather than

decreasing it.) Then we would have to repay what we have borrowed. At what rate? And for how long? Well, at 6 percent the interest alone is $657 million per day ($240 billion divided by 365). If we started a repayment plan of, say, $1 billion per day ($343 million per day on top of the interest payments), it would take us more than eleven thousand years to pay off $4 trillion.

People think it does not really matter that our government owes money since, as they say, we owe it to ourselves. But that is unsound reasoning. Money borrowed by government always has to be repaid by someone. It can be repaid literally by future taxes or deceitfully by future inflation, in which the dollars are simply made to be worth less. Or it can be repudiated during a period of political upheaval. In other words, it can be stolen from the lenders, who are the people. There are no other possibilities. Debt simply does not go away.

We can't do anything about the government's debt, of course, except perhaps trying to elect representatives with enough courage to fight it. But we can do something about our own debt, which for many people today is a serious problem.

The difficulty is that our consumer-oriented culture has deceived many people into living beyond their means on the assumption that they will have more money in the future so they can buy on credit now, enjoy their possessions, and pay later. That is a dangerous assumption, of course. We cannot count on earning more in the future than the present. But even if we could count on this, to live by debt financing is still foolish.

The problem is that you not only have to repay the amount borrowed plus interest, you also have to repay interest on the interest still owed. This is known as compounding, and it is the exact opposite of the way money invested early and regularly grows into substantial amounts over a lifetime. This is why if you buy a $100,000 house with a thirty-year mortgage at 10 percent interest, you will have made total payments of over $315,000 by the end of the thirty years. If you live within your means and save, compounding works for you. A person who saves can

actually become wealthy by the time of retirement, even if his or her salary is small. On the other hand, if you live beyond your means by borrowing, compounding works against you and can trap you before you are even aware of what is happening.

The biggest trap is credit cards. Almost all creditworthy adults have at least one credit card, and the average cardholder has seven. If you have credit cards and use them only for convenience, paying the full amount due each month so that you never have to pay interest, you are in fine shape. But if you use them to borrow on time, you are headed for trouble. Unfortunately, most people use them as a revolving line of credit.

In 1988 *Money* magazine reported that the average balance on these cards per person was $1,450 and that millions of Americans had outstanding debts of $2,500 or more. In their judgment, more than twenty million households were living beyond their means. Today, of course, the problem is even worse, and the inability of these millions of people to repay their debts is contributing to our current sluggish economy.

Yet consumer credit companies continue to bombard us with appeals to add just one more credit card. This is not because our credit is so good they just cannot resist wanting us as clients, but that they get 18 to 21 percent interest on whatever we fail to pay monthly, and that is much more than they can get by lending their money at today's competitive bank rates. If you fall for their seductive appeals and end up buying *anything* on credit, you are foolish.

Ron Blue is a Christian financial planning expert who has written a good book on biblical principles for personal finance called *Master Your Money.* In it he tells an interesting story. When the Sears company introduced its Discover Card they used Atlanta as a test market, and the Atlanta papers reported that Sears officials expected credit card usage to go up by thirty-five billion dollars as a result of introducing the new card. Their studies showed that the new card would be used for incremental borrowing. That is, it would not be a case of people

borrowing on the Discover card rather than on some other card, like American Express, Visa, or MasterCard, for instance. It would be additional borrowing, because the new card would be an additional credit line for those who had it.

Blue talked to a banking friend about the way banks view people who pay credit card bills on time, thus avoiding the high interest. The banker told him that in the banking industry a person who pays his bills right away is known as a "deadbeat," because the company is unable to make much money from him. A decade or so ago a deadbeat was someone who failed to pay his bills. Now he is someone who pays his bills promptly.

Climbing Out of the Debt Pit

There are few ministers today who are not frequently called upon to counsel persons who have been trapped by debt. In fact, the problem has become so serious, even among otherwise solid evangelical people, that many churches have developed financial counseling classes to help parishioners with their debt problems.

Suppose you have been trapped by debt. You cannot pay your bills each month, and the problem is getting worse rather than better. What are you going to do about it? Our text says, "Let no debt remain outstanding." How are you going to obey this vital biblical command? Let me suggest the following practical steps.

1. *Recognize that you have a spiritual problem.* If you are a Christian, this is the place you need to start, because it will place the responsibility for your condition on you and not on God or adverse circumstances, and assuming responsibility for your own life is the healthiest and most important course for anyone.

Sometimes when Christians get trapped by debt they go to their ministers and ask why God hasn't fulfilled his promise. Hasn't he said that he will "meet all [our] needs" (cf. Phil. 4:19)? Does God break his promises? Does he fail to keep his word? You know the answer to that.

God never breaks his word. Therefore, God has not failed you. Rather it is you who have failed him.

Instead of being spiritual, you have become secular in your thinking. You have listened to the siren song of the secular culture surrounding you, and you have adopted a consumptive lifestyle on the world's recommendation and urging. You have been adopting the world's hedonistic philosophy: "Do it now." "Live it up." "You only go around once." "You're worth it."

Earlier in this volume I addressed the harmful effects of television. Ron Blue makes this observation:

The more television a person watches, the higher lifestyle the person is apt to desire. Television advertising is extremely sophisticated and effective. In a similar way, the more time you spend in shopping malls, the higher lifestyle you are apt to want because you are surrounding yourself with temptation. It is much like going to the grocery store just before mealtime to do your weekly shopping. Chances are that you will spend substantially more than if you went after a meal and with a specific list in mind.

2. *Stop buying on time.* Simply stop taking on more debt, in any way or for any reason. There are reasons why debt is sometimes a right strategy—to buy a house, for example, assuming that you are able to afford it and still meet your other financial obligations. But if you are trapped by debt, as many are, it is essential that you absolutely stop adding to it. How? Well, one way would be to cut up your credit cards or lock them away.

Money magazine is not in the business of discouraging borrowing. But in the 1988 issue I cited earlier the editors wrote, "If willpower alone cannot stop your borrowing, try plastic surgery: cut up your cards, cancel your credit lines, and close your overdraft accounts."

3. *Reduce your expenditures to below your current income.* Live within your means. Blue says it like this: "Spend less than you earn and do it for a long time, and you will be financially successful."

Do you remember Charles Dickens's touching character Mr. Micawber from *David Copperfield*? Micawber was always living a bit beyond his means, which led to the loss of everything he owned, eventually even to his being put in prison. Micawber understood his problem, as many today do not, and he gave Copperfield this warning: "Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen, nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery. The blossom is blighted, the leaf is withered, the God of day goes down upon the dreary scene, and—in short you are for ever floored. As I am!"

If you have trouble reducing your expenditures, you need to prepare a budget and stick to it. If you cannot do that, you need to seek help from a professional counselor about where cuts in your spending should be made.

And this might be helpful. Blue says that at one point in his career he read that using credit cards will cause a family to spend 34 percent more than they would if they were to pay for everything they purchased with cash. That was supposed to be true even if they always paid their credit card bills immediately. Blue found this hard to believe. But he decided to try it. He had always paid his credit card bills at once, because he resented having to pay interest on the money. Nevertheless, he and his wife talked it over, put their credit cards away, and for a year lived strictly on cash.

Were they inconvenienced? Yes. It meant carrying a lot of cash around, and it took a lot to pay for such high-priced items as household appliances, car repairs, and airplane tickets. But having to pay with cash changed Blue's thinking. Paying cash at the drugstore caused him to think carefully about what he was buying and in some cases to eliminate impulsive purchases. Paying cash for clothes caused him to ask whether he really needed them or whether something cheaper might be equally as good.

The bottom line is that at the end of his experimental year, when he added up what he had spent, Blue found that his living expenses had

decreased 33 percent from what they had been the year before when he had been using his credit cards. And he had thought that he was living on a barebones budget even then! That might be a good strategy for you, if you are having trouble living within your current income.

4. *Sell assets to reduce your current debt.* There are only two ways to get out of debt after you have decided to do it: (1) sell off unnecessary assets in order to repay the debt and (2) begin a repayment schedule and stick to it. Neither of these is easy, which is one reason why getting into debt is so bad. But of the two, the easiest is to sell off assets. You will not be able to do this with everything. But there are probably some things you can sell—a high-priced or second car perhaps, a recreational vehicle, a boat, stereo equipment, or other such items.

5. *Pay something on each debt each month.* Not everyone has the luxury of being able to sell off assets to repay debt. In fact, 80 percent of Americans owe more than they own, which means that selling assets is not much of an option in their cases, though they may be able to reduce their debt by selling some items. Therefore, for most people the only remaining way to get out of the debt trap is by carefully preparing and rigidly following a debt repayment schedule.

Blue has two additional suggestions at this point. First, concentrate on eliminating the smallest debts first. This will make the repayment project simpler, and it will be good for you to have some reward for what may be a long and difficult effort. When you have eliminated the smallest debts, you can apply what you would have been spending on those debts to the other, greater liabilities. Thus, you will be building momentum that will itself be encouraging.

Second, precommit any unexpected income to your debt repayment. If you are a Christian, this will alert you to God's providential oversight of your financial life. If you are seriously trying to obey God in respect to the text we are studying—"Let no debt remain outstanding"—God will most likely provide funds you have not been expecting, and you will be

able to thank him for it. When that happens, you will have come far from the attitude that asks, "Why did God let me get into this mess?" or "Why hasn't God kept his promises?" And you will be thinking instead, "What is God trying to teach me through this bad situation?"

He Never Earned More Than $8,000

I want to end with this story, again from the book by Ron Blue. On one occasion a retired pastor came to him for some financial advice. He had never earned more than $8,000 in any one year, and he wanted to know if he would have enough money to live out his life in retirement. At this point the man was eighty years old, and he had been retired for twenty years.

Blue began to ask about his finances. Did he have any debts? No. Why not? Because he knew he would have to repay them someday, and he wasn't earning enough money to pay off debt, feed his family, and give his tithe. Did he have any assets? Yes. He had $250,000 in cash and money market funds in his wife's name and an additional $350,000 in his own name, a total of $600,000. Oh and, yes, he had also invested $10,000 in a new company some years ago, and the value of the stock had by this time grown to $1,063,000. Total assets $1,663,000! And he had never earned more than $8,000 a year! Blue sent him away with no advice at all and told him not to listen to anybody else, either. What he was doing was just fine.

That is a remarkable story, of course. Not everyone will invest in a company that can grow assets from $10,000 to $1,000,000 in a lifetime. But it is a striking illustration of what can happen if a person handles his or her finances as a Christian should.

Chapter 205.
The Debt of Love

Romans 13:8-10

After I had preached the sermon that was the basis for the previous chapter, a number of people told me about their experiences of getting out of debt. The most moving stories were those that told of the tremendous relief and sense of new freedom when the last of the person's burdensome debts was paid off. One person said that it was an experience second only to having been set free from the burden of sin through faith in Jesus Christ.

I have never been in debt financially, but I can understand how immense the relief of getting out of debt must be. Yet there is one debt we can never get out from under, and that is the debt to love.

Our text says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandments there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10).

A Permanent Obligation

What this means, in very simple terms, is that we can never say that we have satisfied our obligations in this area. Leon Morris puts it like this: "We can never say, 'I have done all the loving I need to.' [This is because] love is a permanent obligation, a debt impossible to discharge." This is not the first time Paul has written about the Christian's obligation to love. He wrote about Christian love in chapter 12 (vv. 9-13), where he showed both what love is like and how it is to function.

1. *What love is like.* Love must be both sincere and discriminating: (1) "Love must be sincere" and (2) "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9).

The Greek word translated *sincere* is *anupokritos*, the latter part of which has given us *hypocrisy* and *hypocritical*. *Anupokritos* means without a mask, referring to the way in which, in the Greek theater,

actors would carry masks to signal the role they were playing. When Paul tells us that love is to be *an* (that is, "not") hypocritical, he is saying that those who love are not to play a role but are rather to drop their masks and be genuine.

The second part of Romans 12:9 teaches that love is also to be wise or discriminating. Real love does not love everything. On the contrary, it hates what is evil and clings to what is good. If we truly love, we will hate violence done to other people by whatever means. But we will love those who work for peace and even those who are guilty of the violence, because we will want to turn them from their ways. We will hate lying, but we will love the truth and will at the same time even love those who are lying, for we will see them as people who need the Savior.

2. *How love is to function.* In the verses following verse 9, where he speaks of love's nature, Paul highlights nine specific functions of love. As we saw in chapter 194, in the Greek text of these verses there are nine nouns in the dative case, each of which comes first in its phrase for emphasis. A literal translation of Romans 12:10-13 would be something like this: "*As regards brotherly love,* be devoted to one another; *as regards honor,* honor others above yourselves; *as regards zeal,* never be lacking; *as regards service,* always keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord; *as regards hope,* joyful; *as regards affliction,* patient; *as regards prayer,* faithful; *as regards the needs of God's people,* sharing; *as regards hospitality,* pursuing."

In his description of love's nature and function in chapter 12, Paul had the love of believers for one another specifically in mind (though he broadens his outlook toward the end of the chapter), and he was emphasizing love of the good as opposed to love of evil. The new elements in chapter 13 are: (1) he is talking about all people, not just Christians, and (2) as far as the nature of love is concerned, he is

teaching that love is the fulfillment of the moral law. **Love for all Persons**

In Paul's writings the words "one another," as in the phrase "except the continuing debt to love one another," usually refer to Christians. But in this case they surely, though uncharacteristically, refer to all people. This is because immediately after this Paul begins to discuss the moral law, which is binding upon all and is for all, indicating that love for others is the fulfillment of this law, and also because he immediately broadens the statement about loving "one another" by adding, "He who loves *his fellowman* has fulfilled the law." The word *fellowman* gives the earlier phrase its full meaning.

This is in line with Jesus' teaching about love. On one occasion an expert in the law asked Jesus what was necessary to earn eternal life, and Jesus replied by referring to the moral law, as he often did. He taught that one is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and, second, "Love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27).

"Who is my neighbor?" the expert demanded.

Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

Luke 10:30-35
Jesus concluded that the neighbor was the Samaritan, though he was of a different racial stock than the man who had been robbed, and that he was a neighbor simply because he had acted to help the unfortunate victim. Jesus taught that anyone who wanted to follow after him and be his disciple would have to show that love to everyone.

Love's Fulfilling of the Law

Jesus quoted Leviticus in the introduction to that parable: "Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). It was what occasioned the expert's quibble. Jesus elsewhere called loving our neighbors as ourselves the second greatest commandment (Matt. 22:39), after loving "the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (v. 37), which was the first. It is significant that Paul quotes that same verse in order to make exactly the same point in Romans 13: "Love your neighbor as yourself (v. 9).

It seems to me that Paul must have been thinking of Jesus' words specifically, since Jesus ended his teaching about the first and second great commandments by saying, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:40), and Paul concludes the same way here (v. 10). True, Jesus spoke both of the first table of the law (love for God) as well as the second table (love for man) and Paul speaks only of love for our fellowman, but that is what the context demands since he is writing about how Christians are to act toward others in this world.

To illustrate his point he lists four of the Ten Commandments.

1. *"Do not commit adultery."* Love will not commit adultery, because this is a sin against both God and others, and love will not harm others. We think of Joseph and the way he was tempted to sin by the wife of Potiphar. He told her, "With me in charge... my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you,

because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:8-9). In Joseph's case, love was the fulfillment of the law against adultery.

2. *"Do not murder."* If love will not harm another person, it surely will not murder another person, even in the sense of attacking him with words (see Matt. 5:21-22). On the contrary, instead of tearing down, love will use words to edify and build up others. Paul told the Corinthians, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1). It does that especially for one who is a "weaker" brother.

3. *"Do not steal."* There are many ways we can steal. We steal from an employer when we do not give him or her the best work of which we are capable. We steal if we overextend our coffee breaks or leave work early. We steal if we waste the products with which we are working. We steal if, as businessmen, we charge too much for our products or try to make a killing in a lucrative field. We steal if we sell an inferior product, pretending that it is better than it is. We steal when we mismanage another person's money, or if we borrow but do not repay what we have borrowed.

If we love other people, we will do none of these things. Instead, we will work so we will not be dependent on others to support us (1 Thess. 4:11) and will have something to share with those in need (Eph. 4:28).

4. *"Do not covet."* The last of the Ten Commandments strikes at the heart of our materialistic, consumer-oriented culture, which teaches us to covet everything. This is the chief cause behind the debt trap so many have fallen into.

The biggest problem with covetousness is not the trouble it gets us into, however, bad as that is. It is rather that it makes us insensitive to the needs of other people. For instead of helping us to see who they are and what their needs are, covetousness makes us jealous of others with the result that we see only what they have—and want it. Covetousness destroyed Aachan, when he saw the wealth of Jericho and took it secretly, contrary to God's express command. Covetousness and

grasping after material things has destroyed the usefulness of many contemporary Christians.

If we loved other people, we would want good things for them rather than letting their good things make us want more for ourselves. In this area, as in the others, love truly is the fulfillment of the law.

Love in Action

It can hardly fail to strike anyone who reads these verses carefully that the examples Paul offers in the form of samples from the moral law are all negative: "Do *not* commit adultery," "Do *not* murder," "Do *not* steal," "Do *not* covet." This is important, because we are hardly in position to do good to another person until we are ready at least to stop doing him or her harm. Still, we must know that real love is also positive. It "does" for the other. This is involved in the very first thing Paul says, for he writes of the "continuing debt to love one another" (v. 8).

Let's think about this "continuing debt" positively, and ask, What does it mean to discharge this debt honestly? Here are some extremely simple but important and often neglected ways.

1. *Listen to one another.* We live in an age in which few people really listen to one another. We talk to or at one another, of course. And the media are always talking at us. But we do not listen, and as a result ours is a lonely age in which community has largely disappeared and hundreds of thousands of people live daily within a soundproofed cocoon.

Quite a few years ago a movie called *Network* provided an excellent critique of our modern, impersonal, television-dominated age. The two main characters were an older man played by William Holden and a young product of the TV generation played by Faye Dunaway. The two were having an affair, but they were not connecting at the personal level. The man, who still remembered what relationships should and could be, was dissatisfied. The woman didn't know what he wanted.

"What do you want from me?" she asked at one point.

"I want you to love me," he answered.

This was a desire she did not understand. So she replied honestly, "I don't know how to do that." The two then stood staring at one another, not speaking, and the viewer became aware of how fragile their relationship was. They could not communicate. There was nothing to hold them together. At that moment the telephone rang. What would happen now? Could the woman ignore the telephone and actually listen to the man? For a moment she seemed to try. But then, as she still stood facing him, her eyes shot sideways to the phone and the opportunity was gone forever. To really love another person we must listen. If we do not know how to listen, we must learn how. And we must take time to do it.

2. *Share with one another.* The second thing we need to do is share ourselves with each other. The problem is that sharing ourselves makes us vulnerable, especially if we are trying to share with a person we care deeply about. We are afraid to be vulnerable.

No wonder the world's people do not share. They usually hate each other below the smooth surface of their relationships, and often their hatreds are not even buried that far. This should not be the case for Christians. We do not need to be afraid to be vulnerable, because we have already become vulnerable before God, meaning that we have already been exposed as sinners before him. There is nothing about us that God does not know. He knows all sins, all our faults, all our miserable failures as human beings. Yet here is the wonderful thing: God loves us anyway and is working in us to make us different people. God has accepted us just as we are, and he is making us to be like Jesus Christ. Therefore, since God has accepted us we do not need to fear rejection by anybody.

Sharing is the reverse side of listening. We listen to the other person as he or she shares. Then we share ourselves. This is the only way to show real love and build real relationships.

3. *Forgive one another.* None of us is without sin. Therefore, we are all guilty of sinning against others. For this reason, listening and sharing also involve forgiveness. Sharing means expressing our hurts, and listening means hearing how we have hurt the other person.

Francis Schaeffer developed this well in a study of love called "The Mark of the Christian."
When we have hurt another person we must say, "I am sorry," he said. But love is more than this. Love is also giving and receiving forgiveness. He referred to the Lord's Prayer, in which Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). This does not suggest that we are only to forgive when the other person is sorry, though we must forgive them. Schaeffer says:

Rather, we are called upon to have a forgiving spirit without the other man having made the first step. We may still say that he is wrong, but in the midst of saying that he is wrong, we must be forgiving....

Such a forgiving spirit registers an attitude of love toward others. But, even though one can call this an attitude, true forgiveness is observable. Believe me, you can look on a man's face and know where he is as far as forgiveness is concerned. And the world is called on to look upon us and see whether we have love across the groups, across the party lines. Do they observe that we say, "I'm sorry," and do they observe a forgiving heart?... Our love will not be perfect, but it must be substantial enough for the world to be able to observe it.

And let's remember how Jesus said, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15). That is the equivalent of saying that you must forgive others to be a true Christian.

4. *Serve one another.* The fourth practical expression of what it means to love one another is service. This does not come to us naturally, which

is one reason the Bible mentions and illustrates it so often.

This was practically the last lesson Jesus left with the disciples. In the Upper Room at the time of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash the disciples' feet. Peter was appalled. "You shall never wash my feet," he said (John 13:8).

Jesus replied that it was necessary if Peter was to be his disciple, and Peter relented. Still none of them understood what Jesus meant or why he was doing what he was doing (John 13:2-11).

So Jesus explained, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:13-17).

Jesus was giving an example of menial service, teaching that we are to serve others. On another occasion he said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26-28).

What the World Needs

Some time ago there was a popular song with the words, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." Love *is* exactly what the world needs—the song was right about that. But it was also wrong, because the love it was singing about was only the sweet, sentimental love of our empty, commercial age, and that love is not good enough. What the world needs is the sincere, selfless, sacrificial, serving love of God displayed in those who know him and are determined to obey him faithfully.

If you know Jesus, you will not follow after the world's selfish ways but instead will love as God loves. You will keep the law: "Love is the fulfillment of the law." But you will also go out of your way to listen to, share with, forgive, and serve all other people.

Chapter 206.
Understanding the Times

Romans 13:11

This study is about "understanding the times," a challenge suggested by the first half of Romans 13:11. I begin by referring to two other sections of the Bible.

First, Matthew 16:1-3. The leaders of the people had come to Jesus to ask for a sign from heaven, and he replied by saying that they already been given signs and that their problem was that they would not understand the ones they had. Then he used a popular saying similar to our adage: "Red sky at night, sailors' delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning."

Jesus said, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:2-3). His point was that they could not interpret the signs of his coming.

The second passage is from 1 Chronicles 12, which lists the warriors who came to David when he was king at Hebron. The men of Issachar were among them, and they are described as those "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12:32).

So we have, on the one hand, those who could not "interpret the signs of the times" and, on the other hand, those who "understood the times and knew what Israel should do." It is against this background that I set Romans 13:11, our text: "And do this, *understanding the present time."*

The combination of verses causes us to ask: Do we understand the times in which we live? If not, why not? If we do, what are we doing about it? The bottom line is that if we understand the present time, we will know what to do with our time—and will do it, if we are wise.

This Present Time

I have been surprised by the way some commentators have used this text to discuss eschatology. Because the verse goes on to say, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed," they speculate about how close that final deliverance (or salvation) really is.

But that is not what this verse is about. The Greek words say merely, "And this, knowing the time." Yet the New International Version is surely correct when it adds the word "present" to indicate that the time Paul is concerned about is not some future time when the Lord Jesus Christ will return, but rather the present time. And he is concerned that we understand it and use it wisely, knowing that it will be gone forever and the opportunities it holds will be lost forever, when Jesus comes.

So what about this present time? What kind of time is it? Let's look at several passages that describe it clearly.

This Present *Evil* Time

Galatians 1:4 lays the groundwork for our thinking in this area, saying that Jesus "gave himself for our sins to rescue us from *the present evil age,* according to the will of our God and Father." Obviously, in this verse Paul is thinking of this world's time as a whole, all time prior to the return of Jesus Christ in glory, and he is telling us that it is an evil time out of which we need to be rescued.

I wonder if we really believe that this is a "present evil age." I suspect that what we really believe is that this age is really rather nice, something to be sought after and enjoyed as much as possible.

You are never going to make any true progress in wisdom unless you begin by realizing that this world is hostile to God and opposed to any desires for godliness on the part of God's people. Jesus said it clearly. He told his disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Later he prayed, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15).

What this means is that all cultures decline to the degree that they reject Christ. And the more radical the rejection, the more rapid the disintegration. Our own Western culture is declining rapidly.

A number of contemporary writers are saying this, and not all are Christians. Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind,* is one example. It deplores the decline of Western standards of education due to the overthrow of moral and cultural values by philosophic relativism. Another book that deals with the impact of relativism and the abolishing of Christian absolutes in twentieth-century history is English historian Paul Johnson's masterful study, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*. I think too of Malcolm Muggeridge's *The End of Christendom,* Carl F. H. Henry's *Twilight of a Great Civilization,* Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction,* and Charles Colson's *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*. I encourage you to read them, if you want honest, penetrating studies of this age.

In *Against the Night,* Charles Colson quotes Whittaker Chambers, a former communist spy who became a Christian and a passionate defender of the West, but who died despairing of it:

It is idle to talk about preventing the wreck of Western civilization. It is already a wreck from within. This is why we can hope to do little more now than snatch a fingernail of a saint from the rack or a handful of ashes from the fire, and bury them secretly in a flower pot against the

day, ages hence, when a few men begin again to dare to believe that there was once something else, that something else is thinkable, and need some evidence of what it was and the fortifying knowledge that there were those who, at the great nightfall, took loving thought to preserve the tokens of hope and truth.

Those are grim words, but they are an honest reflection on this present (or any other) age apart from the true God and the power of true Christianity.

The Sign of Jonah

In 2 Corinthians 6:2, Paul writes, "I tell you, now is *the time of God's favor,* now is the day of salvation." In other words, although this is indeed an evil age, it is nevertheless also the age in which God has accomplished our salvation.

We see this too in Matthew 16:4, the verse immediately following Jesus' words about the Pharisees and Sadducees' failure to interpret the signs of the times. Jesus told them, "A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." It is clear from the way he had spoken of Jonah four chapters earlier that he was referring to his own upcoming death and resurrection.

And that is exactly the way the rest of Matthew 16 unfolds. You will recall that immediately after this and after warning his disciples of what he called "the yeast of the Pharisees and
Sadducees"—that is, their teaching—Jesus asked the disciples who the people thought he was.

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered for the others: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:13-15). Jesus then explained how Peter's answer was

right and that it was something that had been revealed to him by God. In other words, he put his seal of approval on Peter's true answer, affirming that Peter (and eventually the other disciples too) had interpreted the signs of the times correctly. They had observed what was happening in Christ's ministry and had therefore come to understand that he was the Son of God and to believe on him.

But the salvation Jesus was bringing was by way of the cross. At the time this was something Peter did not understand at all. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But when Jesus went on to teach that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matt. 16:21), Peter rebuked him, saying that he didn't want that to happen to Jesus. Peter needed to be rebuked by Jesus instead.

If we are to understand this present time, we must understand that this is also a time marked out by the cross of Jesus Christ, whom God sent to be our Savior. Paul wrote, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).

A Time to Repent and Believe

A third passage is from the day, a week before his death, when Jesus was approaching Jerusalem. When he saw it he began to weep, saying, "If you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you peace —but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize *the time of God's coming to you*" (Luke 19:41-44).

What Jesus meant was that the people had been given time to repent of their sins and turn to him and be saved. But they had refused to do it, and as a result the time of their opportunity was drawing to an end.

That is exactly the condition of people in our world today, since the destruction of Jerusalem, which overtook the people of that city within a generation of Jesus' death and resurrection, was a foretaste and warning of the final judgment that is to come upon every member of our race. Judgment will fall on you, if you are not trusting Jesus Christ for your salvation. He himself will be judge. But here is the good news. Today is the day of God's grace. Judgment has not yet come. Therefore, turn from your sin and believe on Jesus. Perhaps this is the very moment of God's coming to you personally.

A Time of Gospel Proclamation

In the first chapter of Acts, at the very beginning of the account of the founding and growth of the Christian church, the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, are you *at this time* going to restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). Their question showed that they were still thinking in unbiblical categories. The Jews expected the Messiah to drive out the Romans, who occupied their country, and reestablish David's dynasty and an independent state of Israel. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, so they anticipated that he would fulfill this popular expectation.

Jesus replied that this is not what this age is about. This age is one of gospel proclamation. He said, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you
will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8).

That is the fourth text needed to explain the nature of the times in which we live. It tells us that it is not for us to know the times God has set for the end of all things. That alone should rebuke the many extravagant attempts to discern the end of the age from Romans 13 or any other passage touching on eschatology. What we are to know is that these are gospel times, times given to us by God to take the good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the way of salvation, to all people throughout the whole world.

Going back to Romans 13:11, this means that if you really do understand the present time, which is what the text is asking you to do, you will be in the vanguard of those who are seeking to lead others to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

What else is time for, if it is not for that? It is not time for you merely to make money or a name for yourself or to have a good time. How could you even suppose that merely making money or becoming famous or enjoying yourself is what life is about? Life is from God, and the time you have has been given to you by him. Time is for Jesus, and history is about God calling a people out of this present evil age to believe in and also live for him. Your role in this present time, if you are a believer, is to live for Jesus—and witness for him too.

Jesus told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

The Time Is Short

In 1 Corinthians 7:29 Paul adds something else about time that fits perfectly with what he is saying in Romans 13: *"The time is short."* If we are going to serve Jesus Christ, we had better do it now, because we do not have forever. In Romans Paul develops this same idea by saying, "The hour has come for you to wake from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

This is true in two senses, and each can be applied both to believers and to unbelievers.

1. *The return of Jesus Christ is imminent. Imminent* is not a calendar term, as if we might be saying that Jesus' return is going to take place tomorrow or, at the latest, the day after that or the day after that. Some Bible teachers have fallen into the error of saying this and even of setting dates. But imminent does not mean immediate.

It means it could be at any moment—nothing stands in its way. Of course, that is important all by itself. Since Jesus could return to wrap up this age and usher in the final judgment at any moment, it is urgent that you be ready to meet him, whoever you are and whenever he may come.

If you are a Christian, you must be ready to render account for what you have done with the talents and opportunities he has given you. If you are not a Christian, you will be judged. Anyone who understands this about the times will flee from sin to Jesus and then live for him and serve him with all the strength he provides.

2. *The time when you must stand before Jesus Christ is close.* That is, regardless of the time when Jesus will return, your personal end is very close. At the best you will die in seventy or eighty years. You may die tomorrow, or today.

If you are trusting Christ, that time is "nearer... than when [you] first believed," to use Paul's words. Soon *you* will stand before Jesus to give your accounting. Will you acquit yourself well on that day of final reckoning? Will you hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:23)? Or will you be ashamed to stand before him?

If you are not a Christian, tremble! And know no peace until you do trust Jesus. In that same parable, the master says of the unbelieving person, "Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30).

Redeeming the Time Because...

The sixth and final text having to do with the time in which we live and how we are to understand it is Ephesians 5:16, which brings us back to what Paul wrote in Romans 13 as well as to the evil of this present time: "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." The

King James Version says, "*Redeeming the time*, because the days are evil."

The great American Puritan Jonathan Edwards was aware of how important time is. In his youth, before the age of twenty, he wrote out as a personal resolution: "Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can." He did this faithfully himself. So it is not at all surprising to find him urging the same on those he taught for so many years in Northampton.

One of his sermons, preached in December 1734, is called "The Preciousness of Time and the Importance of Redeeming It" and is based on Ephesians 5:16. One section of that sermon was on improving the time we have. Among his points were these:

1. *"Consider... that you are accountable to God for your time."* Time is as much a talent given you by God as your natural attributes or advantages. If you were really convinced that you will have to give God an accounting for what you do with your time, would you not use it otherwise than you do? Would you not resolve "never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way [you] possibly can"? If you believe that, all that is left is to do it.
2. *"Consider how much time you have lost already."* If you are old or in middle age, you need to pay special attention to this. If you have not been active in Christ's service, you have wasted many precious moments. You can never make them up. But should you not then make every effort to use the remaining time well? Should you not "redeem the time" you do have, knowing the evil of the age and the value of the gospel?
3. *Consider how you may "improve the present time without delay."* There is nothing you can do about the past, but you should at least make sure that you do not repeat your former errors. Turn from your idleness, sin, or unbelief. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and determine to follow him. Witness for him. Remember that you

are to understand the times and use time wisely. The time is coming when "time shall be no more."

Chapter 207.
Sleepers Awake!

Romans 13:11

My favorite radio station has a unique feature of its early-morning programming called the "Sousalarm." They play a lively Sousa march at 7:15 A.M. sharp to rouse listeners out of bed and get them started on the day. In this text we have a "gospel alarm," taken from Paul's call to Christians in Romans 13. It is an insistent wake-up call: "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed" (Rom.
13:11).

Paul's Teaching and Jesus' Teaching

I have had several occasions in these studies of Romans 12 and 13 to show that Paul is reflecting the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ in what he says. Since this is nowhere clearer than in the very last part of Romans 13, let me take just a moment to point up three references. As I see it, these references follow the same sequence as in the gospels. Conventional dating of the New Testament books places the Pauline epistles early and the gospels late, but this does not mean that Paul was necessarily unfamiliar with the material about Jesus' life that was later included in the gospels. Consider what we have in Romans 13:8-11.

1. *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* In verses 8-10 Paul discussed the law of love, probably with an awareness of Jesus' teaching about the greatest and second greatest of the commandments. That specific teaching is found in Matthew 22.
2. *"Understand... the present time."* In verse 11 Paul urged his readers to live godly lives because they understand the present time. This

reminds us of Jesus' instructions to his disciples found in the sermon given on the Mount of Olives before his crucifixion (Matt. 24).

3. *"Wake up from your slumber."* In verse 11 we have Paul's call to Christians to wake up. This bears a striking resemblance to Jesus' parable of the five wise and five foolish women recorded in Matthew 25.

Since Paul is probably echoing Jesus' teaching in this verse, we can conclude that our Lord himself as well as the great apostle to the Gentiles, the leading theologian of the early Church, combine in these words to call each of us to wake up. So I ask, Are you awake? Are you awake to your calling, to your unique opportunities for service as a Christian? Are you using the time the Lord has given you to be a witness for him?

The Sleeping Christian

I begin by reminding you that these words are written to professed believers in Jesus Christ and not to non-Christians. Many who claim to be Christians are asleep. Christians are called to behave in a Christlike way to all people—above all, living out the law of love (v. 10)—but many are not actually doing it. As far as all outward appearances are concerned, they are like those unbelievers around them who are spiritually dead. They are not active for God. They are slumbering.

They are like Jonah when he was running away from God. Jonah was a prophet whom God had called to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the great Assyrian empire. He was to preach a message of judgment against it. But Jonah wouldn't go. As he later explained it, he was aware that God was "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2; cf. Exod. 34:5-7), and he reasoned that if God was like that, then the only possible reason for God's sending him to Nineveh with a message of judgment was so that the people might repent and be saved.

Since the Assyrians were the hated enemies of his own people, the Jews, Jonah didn't want to preach anything to them.

So he ran away to Tarshish, a city on the far side of the Straits of Gibraltar in Spain. He did it by taking a ship from the Jewish port city of Joppa, paying his full fare.

Jonah could take the ship, but God was not obliged to take this disobedience from Jonah. So God sent a storm onto the Mediterranean Sea that threatened to sink the vessel, drowning not only Jonah but also the pagans who were sailing it. It was a furious storm, fierce beyond anything these experienced sailors had ever encountered before. So they were praying desperately, all of them—all, that is, but Jonah. Jonah had gone below deck where he had fallen into a deep sleep.

At this point the captain went to him and rebuked him: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish" (Jonah 1:6).

What a sobering picture this is! The sailors were doing everything they knew to do to save the ship, even praying in their ignorance to whatever gods there might be! But Jonah, the one person who actually knew the great God who controls everything, even the winds and the waves, and who also knew why the storm had been sent, was asleep in the ship's dark hold.

The great French thinker and writer Jacques Ellul wrote a study of Jonah in which he viewed the sailors as standing for the unsaved, perishing world, and Jonah as standing for the insensitive, sleeping church. He notes that in this world (not the world to come, but this world) the destinies of both are linked:

The safety of all depends on what each does. But each has his own thing to do. They are in the same storm, subject to the same peril, and they want the same outcome. They are in a unique enterprise, and this ship typifies our situation. What do these sailors do? First, they do all they humanly can; while Jonah sleeps, they try all human methods to save the vessel, to keep the enterprise going (v. 5). What experience, nautical

science, reason, and common sense teach them to do, they do. In this sense they do their duty. The sailors are in charge of the world, and in normal conditions they discharge their task correctly. We can ask no more of them. The tragic thing here, however, is that if conditions cease to be normal, it is not the fault of the sailors, the pagans; it is the fault of the Christian who has sailed with them. It is because of him that the situation is such that the knowledge and tradition of the sailors can do no more.

We have to realize once again that this is how it usually is with the world; the storm is unleashed because of the unfaithfulness of the church and Christians. This being so, if the tempest is God's will to constrain his church, a will by which the whole human enterprise is endangered, one can easily see why man's technical devices are of no avail.

When Jonah finally did wake up—or rather was awakened by the captain—he had a valuable message to deliver to the sailors, even though he was running away and had been disobedient. He pointed to the Hebrew God as the true God ("the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land," Jonah 1:9), explained what was going on, which the sailors had no way of knowing ("It is my fault that this great storm has come upon you," Jonah 1:12), and proposed a solution ("Pick me up and throw me into the sea," Jonah 1:12).

In fact, as I read the story I sense that the sailors became believers in God as a result of Jonah's testimony. For we are told at the end of the first chapter, after they had thrown Jonah overboard and the sea had become calm, "At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him" (Jonah 1:16).

Do you know people who need to hear your testimony about the God who is able to save sinners? Of course, you do. They are perishing, and they have no idea what to do. You have the answer. The answer is that God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be their Savior by dying for them and in their place. They need to believe on him. Isn't it time for you to wake up and tell them about Jesus?

He Found Them Sleeping

There is another Bible story that we also need to think about at this point, and that is the story of the disciples sleeping in the garden on the night of Jesus' arrest by the temple authorities. Jesus was praying in great agony, saying to the Father, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). Jesus asked the disciples to keep him company, to watch and pray. But they failed to do it. Instead of praying, they were soon fast asleep even as the enemies of Christ made their way into the garden to carry him off to trial and crucifixion.

The disciples, who had not prayed and therefore had not been fortified by God for what was coming, quickly fled. And a short time later, Peter, who followed the arresting party into the courtyard of the Jewish high priest, denied that he ever knew Jesus (Matt. 26:69-75).

In Jonah's case, the sleeper missed the opportunity to testify about God to the unbelieving world—at least until he was awakened by the world and by circumstances. In the second case, the sleeping disciples failed to pray and were therefore useless when the hour of crisis came.

Is it any different today? Are believers not as much asleep in our day as ever they were? The need of the world is apparent, but we do not see it. We have the answer to the world's troubles, but we don't know it. Or if we do, we fail to make it known. Is that true of you? Awake, sleepers! That is the message. If you have been asleep, you need to wake up right now.

Sounding of the "Gospel Alarm"

Have you ever gone into someone's bedroom to wake him up and found him so deeply asleep that all he wanted to do was keep on sleeping? I am sure you have. So I am sure you can understand that the situation of the church in our day is very much like that. The world is perishing. Christians are sleeping. And Christians do not even want to wake up! It is easier and far more pleasant to go on sleeping. Why should we wake

up? Why should we even want to wake up? Let me give you some reasons.

1. *Because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.* This is the reason Paul himself gives, and it is a powerful one. Whenever it was that you first believed on Jesus Christ as your Savior and promised to follow him as his disciple—whether five years ago, fifty years ago, or just recently—you have less time to serve him now than you did when you first believed. Your time is not unlimited. Besides, it is slipping away with every passing moment. When are you going to live for Jesus, if not now?

If you are a young person, it is easy to suppose that life is long and that you still have plenty of time to serve Jesus. You do not know that, of course. There is no guarantee that you will live through today, let alone for forty, fifty, or sixty more years. But even if you do have a very long life before you, why should you want to waste the time you have? Or if you waste it now, forming a pattern of living for yourself rather than for God, what is to make you think that you will change your self-centered ways and be of any use to others later? If you do not wake up and live for Jesus now, it is likely that you will continue sleeping into old age and die having done nothing at all of value for the Lord Jesus Christ or his kingdom.

If you are an old person, you may have wasted many years—just as I have been describing. You are willing to confess that what I have just said is very true. Past days are indeed lost opportunities. But you are still here, you are still listening, and what I am saying is, "Wake up!" Even on his deathbed, young David Brainard, a missionary to the American Indians and close friend of Jonathan Edwards, took time to teach a young Indian boy to read so he could read the Bible. He was glad that there was still something, even in his weakened state, that he could do for Jesus. Is there nothing you can do, even in your old age?

2. *Because you have no right to sleep when there is work to do.* The great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon gave a sermon on Romans 13:11 in which he explained why believers have no right

to be asleep. He showed that Christians have been rescued from death to be Christ's witnesses and that they are called to be alert and working until Jesus comes.

He developed this from the case of the ten virgins in Christ's parable:

When the five wise virgins went out to meet the bridegroom, and took their lamps with them, what right had they to be asleep? I can very well understand those sleeping who had no oil in the vessels with their lamps, because when their lamps went out they would be in the dark, and darkness suggests sleep. But those who had their lamps well trimmed, should they go asleep in the light? Those that had the oil, should they go to sleep while the oil was illuminating them? They needed to be awake to put the oil into the lamp. Besides, they had come out to meet the bridegroom. Could they meet him asleep? When he should come, would it be fit that he should find those who attended his wedding all asleep in a row, insulting his dignity and treating his glory with scorn?

We might argue that if they had been awake they might have been able to instruct and help those other women who were not ready for the Lord's return and who were eventually shut out of the wedding banquet.

3. *Because we have many enemies who are awake and working even if we are not.* This is a point Spurgeon also makes, pointing to the enemy who sowed the tares in the gospel field "while everyone was sleeping" (Matt. 13:25). He said:

You may sleep, but you cannot induce the devil to close his eyes.... You may see evangelicals asleep, but you will not find ritualists slumbering. The prince of the power of the air keeps his servants well up to their work. Is it not a strange thing that the servants of the Lord often serve him at a poor, cold, dead-alive rate? Oh, may the Lord quicken us! If we could with a glance see the activities of the servants of Satan, we should be astonished at our own sluggishness.

At the height of the cold war Robert McNamara, who was at the time United States secretary of state, said that he always had to remember

that "when we are sleeping the other two-thirds of the world is awake and up to some mischief." As for ourselves, if we understood that the enemies of the gospel are always awake, wouldn't we be more alert in opposing them and speaking up for Jesus?

4. *Because there is something worth waking up for.* I am told that one of the saddest things about the prisons of this country is that so many prisoners fall into what the wardens call a prison shuffle, moving at the slowest possible speed, and that many who are imprisoned spend long hours in their beds trying to sleep the lengthy years of their sentences away. That is sad, but understandable. It is understandable that people who have nothing to live for should want to kill time.

But that is not our case. We have meaningful work to do. We have the task of telling men and women of that Savior who, if they believe on him, will lift them out of darkness into light and out of death into life. Moreover, that life is an eternal life, so the fruit of what we are given to do as Christians is eternal. Those who are saved through our witness will be in heaven with God forever. They will be part of that everlasting chorus that will be praising God. Likewise, the good works we do will be remembered before God forever. Not even a cup of water given to a thirsty person in Christ's name will be forgotten.

What else in all of life is like that? Everything else is going to pass away. It will perish. So why live for things that perish? Live for God. The Bible says, "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). Our text says, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber." Or as the King James version has it, "It is high time" to wake up! And so it is!

The Sad Case of Unbelievers

Romans 13:11 is directed to Christians, but it is legitimate to address unbelievers also. Some
Christians are asleep in respect to spiritual things, but unbelievers are more than asleep—they are spiritually dead, because unaided by God

they are unable to respond to, understand, or even hear the gospel.

Here I turn back to Matthew 25:1-13, which contains the parable of the five wise and the five foolish women. In Spurgeon's handling of the story, the focus was on those who had no right to be asleep. Spurgeon applied it to people who know Jesus Christ but who are asleep and therefore fail properly to wait for or serve him. But what of the other five women? They were not true believers; they were lost. What of them?

The important thing about this part of the parable is that those who were lost actually thought they were saved and, in fact, for a time were indistinguishable from their believing sisters. This is a point made in each of the three parables in this chapter. The five women had received the bridegroom's invitation, had responded positively, and were even waiting for his coming. They were sure they would be admitted to the wedding banquet. Therefore, even though they were not ready when he came because they were off buying oil, trying to get ready, they expected him to open the door to them and were incredulous when he turned them away.

"Sir! Sir! Open the door for us!" they cried.

He replied, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you" (Matt. 25:11-12).

In the next story the servant who buried his master's talent and did not use it was amazed when the master disapproved of his actions. He thought he had done well, but his master called him wicked and lazy and had him cast "outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:26-30).

In the third parable recounted in Matthew 25, the goats could not understand why they were rejected since, as they implied, they would have fed Jesus if they had seen him and understood that he was hungry, or given him something to drink if they had seen him and understood that he was thirsty, or invited him in, or clothed him, or looked after him, or gone to visit him. They did not understand that they would have been able to do that only by helping other people or understand that

their opportunity to do it was now past. They too were asleep. They also perished.

In each of these cases, the people involved were members of what we would call the visible church. So the parables are to warn such people, people who think everything is well with their souls, that they need to wake up to their true spiritual condition.

This is what happened during the American revivals that took place in the colonies under the preaching of such godly men as Jonathan Edwards, Gilbert Tennent, and George Whitfield. The movement was called the Great Awakening because this was the first effect the preachers of the gospel noticed. They noticed that people who had been thinking of themselves as Christians woke up to the fact that they were not actually born-again children of God and were distressed by that fact. Once awakened, they were able to hear the gospel and believe it. By believing they gave evidence that they were spiritually regenerated or revived.

What we need today is another Great Awakening. It is what you need if you only *think* you are a Christian.

Chapter 208.
Saint Augustine's Text

Romans 13:12-14

There are some verses in the Bible that immediately bring to mind some great Christian leader or hero of the faith, just because they are so closely associated with that person's life or testimony. Romans 1:17 is the best-known example, because it was used of God in the conversion of Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation: "The just shall live by faith" (KJV). But how about Matthew 28:20, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (KJV)? That was the life verse of David Livingstone, the great pioneer missionary to central Africa. Or John

Newton's text: "Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondsman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee" (Deut. 15:15, KJV)? Newton, the former "slave of slaves," regarded those words as a description of his early dissolute life and of God's deliverance of him from it.

There are so many of these verses, all linked to the conversion or life work of some great Christian leader, that earlier in this century an Australian pastor named Frank W. Boreham produced a series of books on them that proved immensely popular. Most bore as a subtitle the words: "Texts That Made History." At the end of Romans 13, we arrive at three verses that make anyone who knows anything of church history think at once of Saint Augustine, the words God used in his conversion: "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Rom. 13:12-14). How it came about is a fascinating story.

Augustine's Early Life

Saint Augustine's first name was Aurelius, though he himself never used it—we know it only from those who wrote about him. Augustine was born on November 13, 354 a.d., of mixed pagan and Christian parentage—his mother was a Christian, his father was not—at Tagaste, a small provincial town in North Africa.

His parents had great ambitions for him, though their desires differed greatly. His mother's name was Monnica, and the passion of her life was that her son might become a Christian. His father wanted him to have a superior liberal education and by this means eventually become a great and wealthy man. So Augustine was educated first in his hometown, then at the renowned but notoriously corrupt city of Carthage, also on the northern coast of Africa across from Sicily. Augustine was trained as a rhetorician, one who made his living by arguing cases of law or

giving speeches. He was brilliant and was so successful that he later moved from Carthage to Rome, and eventually, in 384 a.d., from Rome to Milan, where he had been appointed government professor of rhetoric. This post gave him high social standing and brought him into contact with the most influential people in Italy, even members of the Roman court.

In 400 A.D., about fourteen years after his conversion, which took place in Milan in 386 a.d., Augustine published his *Confessions.* This was a book of thirteen relatively short chapters in which he tells of the grace of God in his early life and how God led him to faith in Jesus Christ.

On the very first page, Augustine wrote this sentence: "Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee." He meant that of everyone, of course, but it was especially true of himself and is therefore the major testimony of his life. Augustine tried everything the world had to offer, but he found it all empty. He was indeed restless until he came to rest in Christ.

1. *His youthful pleasures.* To many people one of the most fascinating parts of the *Confessions* is Augustine's description of his early life. Because of what he says, Augustine has been thought of as having lived a wild and wasteful life, being something of an abandoned libertine and a rake. But there are two things wrong with this way of thinking. First, he was not as depraved as we suppose. He was promiscuous, sleeping with many women at age sixteen, but by the age of seventeen he had formed a long-lasting relationship with a woman whom he did not marry—his parents did not want him to marry, supposing that marriage at an early age would be an obstacle to his career—and Augustine and this woman were faithful to each other until they were eventually forced apart to make way for a "proper" legal marriage some fourteen years later. Augustine wrote that while they were together he was faithful to her, and the *Confessions* contain a tragic passage describing his personal heartbreak when they were forced apart.

The second thing wrong with thinking of Augustine as a great libertine is that it somehow makes him worse than we ourselves are. Augustine was no better but also not much worse than everyone else in his time, and the way he lived is all too common even today. We live in an age of similar sexual "liberation," and the pattern of Augustine's early years is duplicated today many millions of times over, even by Christian people. So we are no better. And while it is true that he confessed his sins openly, and we usually do not, his sins were only those of which many of us are also guilty.

But here is the point. With ruthless self-examination and logic this great saint—for such he became—explains that even in his indulgences his heart remained restless. For a time he indeed lived for fleshly pleasures. But he found that even surfeited with all the pleasures of the flesh "our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee."

2. *His quest for philosophical truth.* Augustine did not only have a strong sexual nature, however. He also had a strong and restless mind, and his *Confessions* tell how he journeyed from one popular philosophical system to another to try to discover truth. He was awakened to this pursuit by reading a book of Cicero's, since lost, called *Hortensius.* The great Latin writer had written it to encourage love for philosophy, and this was its immediate effect on Augustine. From this point on Augustine resolved to make truth his sole pursuit.

His strong mind led him into the philosophy of the Manichaeans, who were the rationalists of their age. They expressed a high reverence for Jesus Christ, but their religion was all naturalistic, or antisupernatural. They were critical of the Bible and had developed a way of looking at evil that relieved man of responsibility for personal sins or failures. This was appealing to a young man, as you can imagine. It bolstered Augustine's intellectual pride, allowed him to speak well of his mother's religion, excused his moral failings, and freed him to live in any manner he pleased.

Augustine drifted away from the Manichees at about the time he left North Africa for Rome. For a short while he was disillusioned and skeptical about everything, but he was then introduced to the Platonists, who sought for an immaterial reality, good, or truth behind the observable phenomena of life. This had a deep effect on Augustine since, up to this point, he had been unable to think of anything immaterial as real.

But even this was unsatisfactory. Augustine was on the way toward true faith and God, but he still had not found what he was seeking. In a wonderfully perceptive passage he compares the books of the Platonists with what he later found in Scripture:

I read, not indeed in the same words, but to the selfsame effect, enforced by many and divers reasons, that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made."... But that "he came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." That I did not read there.

In like manner, I read there that God the Word was born not of flesh, nor of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God. But that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us," I read not there....

That before all times, and above all times, thy only-begotten Son remaineth unchangeably coeternal with thee... is there. But that "in due time Christ died for the ungodly," and that "thou sparedst not thine only Son, but deliveredst him up for us all," is not there.

In other words, Augustine learned about the immaterial, unchangeable mind, or *logos*, of God from the Platonists. The Platonists had surmised many true things about God. But Augustine did not find the incarnation of Jesus Christ or the atonement in their writings. He did not find the

gospel. Therefore, he did not find forgiveness for his sins, and his heart remained restless because it had not yet come to rest in God.

3. *His fame.* When Augustine arrived in Milan as government professor of rhetoric at the university, he was immediately launched into the highest and most influential circles of Italian society. His mother was brought over from Africa. The circle of his old intimates gathered around him. Wealthy and influential friends sought him out. He had achieved the fame he sought. But, as often happens when people finally find the thing they have been fervently seeking, Augustine discovered that the realization of his life goal was unsatisfying. In fact, this became the most miserable time of his life. He even became sick of a chest or lung infection, and it was doubtful whether he would be able to continue his career in oratory.

4. *His exposure to religion.* Augustine was always somewhat religious, and his religion was never very far from the true evangelical religion of his mother, which was Christianity.

Augustine was skeptical, but he almost always believed in God, and in these early days he would probably have said that in one way or another he was always striving to know him.

When Augustine arrived in Milan he came under the influence of Ambrose, the bishop of that city. Ambrose was a man of towering intellect, massive learning, and great godliness. Moreover, he was an outstanding preacher. So Augustine, who loved the technical skills of good speaking, went to hear him. At first Augustine was interested only in his homiletical style. But Ambrose was really an expositor of the Bible and thus also an outstanding teacher of Christian doctrine. Almost in spite of himself, Augustine was led deeper into understanding what the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ was all about, though he had not yet come to a point at which he could commit himself to Jesus and become his disciple. He began to read the Bible.

Augustine was also introduced to the lives of several very prominent Christians. One was Victorinus, a rhetorician like Augustine. He made

public profession of his faith in Rome, though he was then well known and his identification with Christ was costly. Augustine was likewise influenced by the story of Antony and the legendary monks of Egypt. Antony renounced the world for Christ. This moved Augustine, who loved the world, but he did not believe the gospel. Augustine understood much about Christianity. But his heart was restless, because he had not yet come to rest in Christ.

"Save Me, But Not Yet!"

Augustine wrote of these days, "To thee, showing me on every side that what thou saidst was true, I, convicted by the truth, had nothing at all to reply, but the drawling and drowsy words: 'Presently, lo, presently'; 'Leave me a little while.' But 'presently, presently,' had no present; and my 'leave me a little while' went on for a long while." He looked to his past and observed, "But I, miserable young man, supremely miserable even in the very outset of my youth, had entreated chastity of thee, and said, 'Grant me chastity and continency, but not yet.' For I was afraid lest thou shouldest hear me soon, and soon deliver me."

On one occasion he cried out to his good friend Alypius, "What is wrong with us?... The unlearned start up and 'take' heaven, but we, with our learning, but wanting heart, see where we wallow in flesh and blood! Because others have preceded us, are we ashamed to follow, and not rather ashamed at not following?"

The Scene in the Garden

At last there came the well-known scene in the garden of a friend's estate near Milan, where Augustine was converted. He and Alypius had been reading the Bible together, but Augustine became so distressed at his own lack of spiritual resolution that he withdrew to a distant part of the garden so he could give vent to his emotion and Alypius would not see his tears.

These are Augustine's words:

I flung myself down, how, I know not, under a certain fig-tree, giving free course to my tears.... And, not indeed in these words, yet to this effect, spake I much unto thee—"But thou, O Lord, how long?" "How long, Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? O, remember not against us former iniquities"; for I felt that I was enthralled by them.... "Why not now? Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?"

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo, I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; take up and read." Immediately my countenance was changed, and I began most earnestly to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing such words; nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it no other way than as a command to me from heaven to open the book, and to read the first chapter I should light upon. For I had heard of Antony, that, accidentally coming in whilst the gospel was being read, he received the admonition as if what was read were addressed to him: "Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me." And by such oracle was he forthwith converted unto thee.

So quickly I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I put down the volume of the apostles, when I rose thence. I grasped, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell,—"Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart—all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

Alypius was converted himself at this time, and both of them went to tell Augustine's mother, Monnica, who had been praying for her son for years and now rejoiced and praised God for his conversion. It was not long after this that Monnica died, as she and Augustine were on their way back to North Africa, where Augustine eventually became a

presbyter and then Bishop of Hippo Regius, serving the Lord there for more than forty years until his death on August 28, 430 a.d., at the age of seventy-six.

Augustine's Later Life

It is hard to overestimate the importance of Augustine's contribution to Christian theology and the church. Hippo was a second-rate diocese, having no special prominence in itself. Besides, it was overrun by the Vandals at the very time Augustine was dying, and the bishopric, the school, and the clergy that Augustine had established and trained were all either widely scattered or destroyed. Nevertheless, Augustine's influence lived on, perhaps more than any other nonbiblical figure, through his writings. They gave form to the best of the church's life during the Middle Ages and were in a sense the true foundation of the Holy Roman Empire.

Adolf Harnack was no conservative theologian, but he called Augustine the greatest man whom, "between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer, the Christian Church has possessed."

After his conversion Augustine produced many polemical works against the Manichaeans, Donatists, and Pelagians, interspersed with Bible expositions and theological studies. He is best known for four works that aptly crown the whole: (1) *The Confessions,* written about 400 A.D.; (2) *On Christian Doctrine,* written from 397-426; (3) *On the Holy Trinity,* written from 395-420; and (4) *The City of God*, written from 413-426. The fourth volume was the first attempt by any Christian writer to produce a philosophy of history, and it has become an acknowledged classic. In it Augustine describes two rival cities or societies "... formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self." It is a masterful way of analyzing history.

Don't Put Off Putting On!

Romans 13:13-14 was not only God's means of leading Saint Augustine to faith in Christ, it was also a summary of his life. Verse 13 describes what he was. Verse 14 describes what he became. The passage from the first condition to the second is what the Bible urges upon everyone.

These two verses are best known for effecting the conversion of Saint Augustine. But if we think about them for a moment, it is evident that they are not in the first instance written to unbelievers to urge them to become Christians at all. This part of Romans, beginning with the first verse of chapter 12, is written to Christians to explain how they are to live. It really means that we who profess Christ are to live godly lives.

But God uses his Word in unexpected ways, and it is impossible to imagine any passage of the Bible that could not be used by God sometime for the conversion of someone. Is that how God has been using these verses in your life? Has he been using Romans 13:13-14 to move you from sinful self-indulgence, a pursuit of wealth and fame, or even religion, to faith in Jesus Christ? If God has been doing that with you, let me say clearly that now is the time to commit yourself to him. Do not say, "Presently, presently" or "In a little while." The present is now. This is the only perfect time to "clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ" and become a Christian.

Part Twenty. Christian Liberty

Chapter 209.

Where Is the Chasm?

Romans 14:1

If someone spends a lot of time talking about a particular subject, it is usually because the person is interested in it and thinks it's important. So apparently Paul is very interested in the way Christians treat other Christians, since he writes on this subject at length.

Romans 14 begins a new section (Rom. 14:1-15:13), and it is one of the book's longest parts— certainly the longest single part of the closing application portion of the letter (Rom. 12:1-16:27). Why does Paul give so much space to discussing why Christians need to accept those with whom they disagree on less than essential matters? What about matters that in our judgment are much more important, like Christian economics, politics, ecology, or the emancipation of oppressed peoples? Is something as "insignificant" as accepting and getting along with other Christians really that important? Apparently Paul thought so.

His instruction about developing a Christian mind, which I personally think is very important, was completed in two verses. To discuss a right estimate of oneself and others and the need to encourage others took six verses. A call to love one another filled thirteen verses; material on the question of church and state, seven verses; right conduct in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, seven verses more. But now his discussion of how Christians are to accept and support other Christians when they do not think or behave as we think they should fills all of chapter 14 and the first half of chapter 15, a total of thirty-five verses. Moreover, this is the last major subject Paul discusses, since following this he begins to talk about his own future plans and sends his final greetings. Apparently, this is the matter he wants to leave before our minds in closing.

There are two main parts to this section: (1) how people with tender consciences are to be treated (14:1-12), and (2) how the "strong" are to use their liberty (14:13-15:13). This is written for the "strong." So if you think you are a strong Christian, both these parts are for you.

What Is the Issue?

The first verse of chapter 14 is a thematic statement. In the New International Version it reads: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." Some people will know it better in the King James Version: "Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Phillips paraphrases, "Welcome a man whose faith is weak, but not with the idea of arguing over his scruples."

There has been a great deal of debate over what Paul is specifically concerned about in this verse and those following. He is talking about people who are "weak" versus those who are "strong." But who are these weak and strong people? Paul does not spell out exactly who they are, nor why the views of the one party are weak or weaker than the other.

Later on in this section Paul mentions two specific matters: (1) the idea that a Christian is free to eat anything versus the idea that he should eat only vegetables, and (2) the keeping of special "holy" days. This makes us think of other passages in Paul's writings in which these matters are mentioned, but there are differences that make it hard to use those passages to explain what Paul is concerned about here.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and 10:23-33 Paul also uses the word *weak* while speaking of those who had reservations about eating meat from animals that had been sacrificed to one of the pagan gods or goddesses. But nothing in Romans mentions idols, and a concern for a vegetarian diet is not an issue in 1 Corinthians. There are similarities, but there is no reason to assume that the two situations were the same.

Again, Paul is concerned with the observance of special "holy" days in Galatians and Colossians. Galatians 4:10-11 says, "You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you." In Colossians 2:16-17 he warns his readers about those who would impose the observance of such days upon them: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Obviously, these are similar texts. But what is most noticeable about them is that Paul takes an entirely different approach in Galatians and Colossians from what he does in Romans. In the shorter Epistles he tells his readers not to become entangled in such things. In Romans he says that none of this matters.

Is Paul being inconsistent, then? Has his mind changed? No! He is merely dealing with different things. John Murray explains it like this:

In Galatians Paul is dealing with the Judaizers who were perverting the gospel at its center. They were the propagandists of a legalism which maintained that the observance of days and seasons was necessary to justification and acceptance with God. This... was "a different gospel which is not another."... In Romans 14 there is no evidence that those esteeming one day above another were involved in any respect in this fatal error. They were not propagandists for a ceremonialism that was aimed at the heart of the gospel. Hence Paul's tolerance and restraint.

A bit further on in this section, in chapter 15, Paul also speaks of differences between Jews and Gentiles, but he is not specific there, either. That is, he does not link the eating of meat or the observance of special days, or their opposites, to either group. So it is not a Jewish asceticism in food versus a Gentile laxity or indulgence that he has in mind.

When we put this together we are probably right to conclude that Paul is not thinking of any one area of action or belief specifically, though he throws out suggestions, but rather that he is intentionally being quite

general. To use our common expression, the problem is that Christians are always dumping on one another. Instead of getting on with living their own lives as best they can to the glory of God or, which is also necessary, living so as to win nonbelievers to Christ, they are wasting their time trying to find fault with one another. They do not trust what God is doing in the other Christian.

We have to stop that behavior, Paul says. We must accept and support one another if we are to hear and heed what Paul is saying in this last major section of the letter.

Today's Issues, Not Yesterday's

Another matter we need to think about as we begin to get into this section is that when we are thinking about accepting other Christians as they are we need to grapple with the issues that are dividing believers today and not those that troubled Christians yesterday.

I can think of several behavioral issues that years ago caused Christians to look down on other Christians and judge them and their conduct unfavorably: drinking, smoking, dancing, and going to movies. I did not spend much time in excessively narrow or legalistic church circles while I was growing up, but if I had, the list might have been expanded to include such things as the length of a boy's hair or the length of a girl's skirt.

In my youth those were the issues that would have fallen into the category Paul is writing about in Romans 14 and 15. And one of the sad things about those years is that what Paul wrote about in these chapters was not heeded. That is, the older generation made such a watershed issue of these things that many young people were turned off to religion, or at least to evangelical or fundamentalist religion, rather than conform to what they understood quite rightly to be other than the essence of the gospel.

Many unbelievers must have been turned off or at least confused by this as well. Many of them undoubtedly got the impression that being a

Christian essentially meant giving up these so-called worldly vices, rather than trusting Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior and Lord.

But here is the problem. If that is all Paul is writing about in Romans 14 and 15, then he really doesn't have much to say to our generation. This is because ours is an antinomian, liberal, allaccepting generation, and except for a few narrow circles that most of us have little or no contact with, most Christians are all too accepting of what used to be called worldly conduct. We don't care whether people smoke or drink or play cards or so forth. That may be good in some ways, though I would argue that it is also bad in others. But that is not the point here. The question here is this: Is this all that Paul is talking about in these chapters; and if it is, shouldn't we just skip ahead to Romans 15:14 and congratulate ourselves on having already mastered this teaching?

I hope we know that this isn't right. The specifics may have changed, but the problem is with us somewhere, and it is probably greater in us than with others, especially if we do not think we have a problem. Let me suggest a few areas where we can apply this today.

1. *When another Christian is going through hard times.* I suppose this is the area in which I see the failure of the self-styled "strong" toward the "weak" brother or sister most often. Christians go through hard times. Sometimes it is in the family. A husband is deserted by his wife, or a wife is abandoned by her husband. Sometimes a Christian loses his job and, if the individual is a husband, may come to a point where he is unable to support his family. Sometimes there is sickness or an accident that brings a person to the very edge of life.

When Christians go through such difficult periods, their fellow believers should rally around them, support and encourage them, and help them financially. But instead, what often happens is that those who ought to help sit in judgment. They say, or at least they think, "That person must be out of the will of God, or this wouldn't have happened to her." Or a man loses his job and another Christian accuses him of failing to support his family, noting cruelly—he has a verse for the

occasion—"If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). When a person has a serious car accident or falls or is struck with a serious disease, someone will say smugly, "God must be trying to get your attention."

What a terrible situation! Such "friends" speak like Job's counselors, and they do not even sit down and empathize with the struggling believer first, as those shallow but at least empathetic men did. Unfortunately, many Christians today lack empathy.

2. *Variations in individual piety.* A second area where Christians continue to judge one another is personal piety. Do you have a "quiet time" every morning? How long per day do you pray? Are you reading good Christian books? How often do you witness?

Don't get me wrong. I think a daily (or at least a regular) quiet time is important. It is essential that we pray, and none of us prays as much as would be profitable. I am constantly saying, "Turn off the television and read a worthwhile Christian book." We are commanded to witness. The problem is that we judge other Christians by whether they measure up to what we ourselves do, forgetting that we are probably not very good models in these areas ourselves, at least if we are to measure our performance by the saints of a past era, and that the other Christian may be excelling in areas with which we are not even familiar.

One very common form of this is the way a "spiritual" wife will judge a husband who does not read the Bible or Christian books as much as she does. He is not thinking about spiritual things all the time; he has his work to think about, and when he comes home he may be tired and perhaps only wants to watch the ball game on television. The wife, if she does not work outside the home and does not have her time entirely taken up with raising young children, has time to read and think. When her husband gets home she wants to talk about what she has been thinking about that day. If he doesn't, she thinks it is because he is not very spiritual or is "not right with
God."

It may well be that the husband is not spiritual, of course. But whether he is or not, the attitude that judges him for what he is not doing and fails to appreciate him for what he is doing is wrong. And it is also wrong when the husband dismisses his wife and her concerns. In this case, it does not matter who is "weak" or who is "strong." What matters is that we accept the other Christian as a believer and trust God for what he is doing in that person's life.

Donald Grey Barnhouse told of being at a luncheon with a group of ministers where someone spoke disparagingly about the clergy in another denomination. They didn't seem to accomplish anything, he said. Barnhouse entered the conversation by telling about one of those ministers whom he had known personally. The man had gone through seminary and had been ordained. But he seldom preached, never went to prayer meetings, and often failed to attend church for weeks at a time. Worse than that, he spent all his time in his library and indulged in habits that others felt were intemperate and un-Christian. He lived this way for more than twenty years. The ministers concluded that a man like that was no credit to the ministry and perhaps was not even a Christian.

Later in the luncheon Barnhouse turned the conversation to the subject of Bible study helps and asked what the others thought was the best Bible concordance. They said that the best was *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance,* which contains Hebrew and Greek word lists and comparative helps. Barnhouse then pointed out that the minister he had described earlier, of whom they had all disapproved, was James Strong, the author of this invaluable volume.

The point was obvious. God has given his servants diverse talents, and he uses them in ways that please him. How we feel about them is irrelevant, since they answer to God rather than to us. Our part is to accept these others as fellow believers and support them and pray for their work.

3. *Denominational affiliation.* Church affiliations also often wrongly divide believers and produce judgmental attitudes. I am not saying

that we have to consider other denominations to be right in their distinctives, any more than we have to consider other Christians as always right when they differ from us. But just as we are to accept other Christians as Christians, so must we accept other denominations as true elements of the one body of Christ—if they acknowledge him as Lord and confess the gospel as the one way of salvation.

4. *Personality differences.* What about personality differences? Does every Christian have to be grim like an undertaker, or always smiling like a stand-up comedian? Charles Spurgeon was the greatest preacher of his age, but he was frequently criticized for being funny. When one woman objected to the humor he inserted into his sermons Spurgeon told her, "Madam, you would think a great deal better of me if you knew the funny things I kept out."

Spurgeon was a character. A young man asked what he should do about a box of cigars he had been given. Spurgeon solved his problem. "Give them to me," he said, "and I will smoke them to the glory of God."

On another occasion Spurgeon was criticized for traveling to meetings in a first class railway carriage. His antagonist said, "Mr. Spurgeon, what are you doing up here? I am riding back there in the third class carriage taking care of the Lord's money." Spurgeon replied, "And I am up here in the first class carriage taking care of the Lord's servant."

Let's stop dumping on one another, and let's allow God to deal with each of his servants how, when, and as kindly as he will. And while we are at it, let's be thankful that he has dealt as kindly as he has with us. If he had not, we would all be in deep trouble.

What Does Paul Advise?

We are only at the beginning of this important section of Romans, of course. There is much more to come. But we should notice clearly even here that Paul has two initial points of advice. In fact, what he says is stronger than advice—these are commands, and the whole sentence is

made up of them: "Accept him whose faith is weak" and "Do not pass judgment in disputable matters."

1. *Accept him whose faith is weak.* This means that we are to accept other Christians as Christians and that, as John Murray says, "There is to be no discrimination in respect of confidence, esteem, and affection."

Accept is a strong term, because it is used of God's acceptance of us in verse 3 and of Christ's acceptance of us in 15:7. Verse 3 says, "The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him." The other verse says, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you." If God has accepted the other person, who are you not to accept him?

2. *Do not pass judgment in disputable matters.* Recognize that some standards of right conduct are unclear and that other matters really do not matter. In those areas, let the matter drop and get on with things that do matter. Above all, accept the other believer for what he or she has to offer to the whole body of Christ. And do your own part too! Tell someone about Jesus. Certainly you have better things to do than to hunt out the speck in the eye of your fellow Christian while overlooking the plank in your own.

Francis Schaeffer used to talk about "the chasm." He said that we put it in the wrong place, dividing ourselves from other Christians. It shouldn't be there. True, there is a chasm between those who know Jesus Christ and those who do not, between Christians and the world, and it is a deep one. But that is where it lies, between Christians and the world, not between Christians and Christians. All who know Jesus Christ are on this side of the chasm, and we must stand with them for Christ's kingdom.

Chapter 210.
Kosher Cooking and All That

Romans 14:2-4

Out in Arizona there is a great rift in the surface of the earth known as the Grand Canyon. On the map it appears only as a slightly shaded area that is not at all imposing. But if you are staying at

a hotel on the north rim of the Grand Canyon and want to go to the south rim, you will discover that the only way you can get there is by driving over several hundred miles of hot desert roads.

I do not know if this is what Francis Schaeffer was thinking about when he spoke and wrote about "the chasm," as he often did. He was an American, but he lived in Switzerland and may have been thinking about some deep chasm in the Alps. But the particular chasm he had in mind is irrelevant. What this great contemporary apologist was thinking about was the way Christians place chasms between themselves and other people, and his concern was that we get our chasms in the right place.

At the end of the last study, I pointed out that Christians tend to place chasms between themselves and other Christians, either judging them not to be Christians at all because of some offensive detail of their conduct or else regarding them as Christians but as those with whom they should have no contact. That is wrong. It is what Paul is denouncing in Romans 14, where he begins by saying, "Accept him who is weak in the faith, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (v. 1).

There is a true chasm, of course, and it is a frightening one. It is between those who are

Christians and those who are not, between those who have been made spiritually alive and those who remain spiritually dead. That chasm can only be bridged by God through the utterly supernatural and spiritual work of regeneration. The chasm is not to be placed between any who truly believe on Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Christians Are Not Clones

Christians have plenty of problems with the world. The world has a different master, pursues different goals, and lives according to a different set of rules. We are not part of it. But the worst problems we face are on this side of the chasm, between Christians who all confess Jesus Christ to be Lord and Savior but who look at some things differently.

Christians are not clones. God could have made us identical copies of one another, I suppose, though that would not have been very interesting. But he did not. He made us very different, and as a result we inevitably act differently and also think differently about the things we do. These variations put strains on us all, and the end result is that we have difficulty getting along. People in the world have problems too, of course. Don't think that it is nicer out there. It isn't. But the fact that unbelievers have trouble getting along with one another does not mean that Christians should be blind to the problems we ourselves have.

What do we do when we encounter Christians who behave differently from us? Paul highlights two wrong responses here.

First, those who consider themselves to be strong in faith frequently look down on or despise the weak—they sneer. On the other hand, the weak usually condemn the strong—they frown.

Using the example of different opinions about what a Christian should eat or not eat, Paul says, "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat must not condemn the man who does" (v. 3).

The First of Paul's Examples: Diet

In the introductory study to this section, Romans 14:1-15:13, I pointed out that Paul is approaching this matter broadly because this is a broad, generic problem in the church. But the problem expresses itself in specifics, and for that reason he gives two examples of what he has in mind. The first is the matter of eating or not eating certain foods. The second is observing or not observing special days.

Let's examine the first example, about what we eat or do not eat. Paul introduces it by saying: "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables" (v. 2). What is he thinking about here? There are several possibilities.

1. *Keeping kosher.* We have already seen that nothing we know about the Jewish community or practice in the first Christian century perfectly fits what Paul says, nor does anything we know about conditions or religious practices among the Gentiles. On the other hand, what we know about each is a legitimate example.

Let's take the Jewish community first. There is nothing in the Old Testament law that required
Jews to be vegetarians, which is what Paul says the "weak" brothers were in his example, but the Jews did have dietary restrictions. In Leviticus 11, careful distinctions are made between "clean" and "unclean" animals. Jews were free to eat the first but not the second. In Leviticus 17, the people were told not to eat blood, which had to be properly drained even from edible meat before it could be eaten. For Jews who "keep kosher" today this means that specifically appointed rabbis must oversee the slaughtering of animals and place kosher labels on the meat. Again, Exodus 23:19 (also 34:26) is a verse that has become the basis for Jews keeping two sets of dishes, one to hold foods made with milk and the other for those without milk. The verse merely says, "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk."

Even though there is nothing in Romans 14 to indicate that this is specifically what Paul has in mind, it is significant, as the great *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by Gerhard Kittel points out, that the word Paul uses to describe the "weak" brother, *astheneô*, is often used for the word *kosher* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. So it is highly likely that Jewish scruples about diet were at least one thing the apostle had in mind.

2. *Gentile asceticism.* Since Paul mentions vegetarianism, which the Jews as a whole did not practice, it is probably also right to suppose that he is thinking of certain kinds of Gentile asceticism,

too, which we find in the writings of some of the Greek and Roman philosophers. At certain periods of ancient history life became so excessively indulgent that many of the pagans adopted a rigidly ascetic lifestyle, dressing in plain clothes, eating simple vegetables, and drinking only water.

In those days some people who thought like this would have become Christians, and it is easy to see how they might have carried their views over into Christianity as something of great importance to them. "After all," they might have said, "if I lived a simple lifestyle before I became a Christian, I am certainly not going to live a less pure life now." They had not learned that what they ate or did not eat was unimportant, and they would easily have become judges of their Christian brothers and sisters who lived like those whose lifestyle they were protesting even before they became believers.

3. *The Corinthian problem.* Finally, we can't overlook the fact that Paul was writing to Rome from Corinth, and he had faced one particular form of the eating problem there (see 1 Cor. 8:113 and 10:23-33).

In the pagan world of Paul's day the practice of religion consisted to a large extent of the offering of sacrifices at pagan temples. The animals were not just burnt up, of course, nor thrown away. Rather, after the offerings were made, the priests would present the carcasses for sale in the marketplaces, and as a result those who went to the market to buy meat would end up with meat from animals that had been sacrificed to the pagan idols. What was a Christian to do if he or she went to a friend's home and meat like this was served? Wouldn't eating it somehow defile the Christian or at least give legitimacy to pagan practices?

Paul answered that "an idol is nothing at all" and that a Christian should feel perfectly free to eat the meat For the sake of those whose consciences might be wounded by such eating, however, a Christian should be sensitive on this issue and not impose his freedom on his weaker brothers or sisters unnecessarily. In a manner exactly parallel to

what he says a bit further on in Romans, Paul wrote, "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall" (1 Cor. 8:13).

What are we to do about matters of eating or drinking, or not eating or not drinking, or similar matters? The important thing about Romans is that Paul is not even dealing with this issue as one to be resolved, but rather with the attitude that either scorns or condemns the other Christian. *That* is the issue! Not the eating or not eating. In other words, what you eat or do not eat or drink or do not drink does not matter, so stop arguing about it, and stop letting it determine with whom you will associate or with whom you will work in Christ's service.

Jesus' Revolutionary Teaching

There is something else we need to think about before we turn to Paul's specific instructions or advice, and that is the teaching of Jesus Christ on this issue, which Paul certainly knew.

Jesus' ministry was conducted almost entirely within Israel within Jewish circles, and the matter of keeping kosher was of great importance to Judaism. Jesus was revolutionary in what he taught on this issue, however. He had been talking about the Pharisees, who had objected to the fact that Jesus' disciples often ate without washing their hands ceremonially according to their law, and he replied by attacking their legalism, which, he said, was exercised without their actually obeying God's commands. One example was the way they avoided taking care of their elderly parents, saying that the money they could have used for this purpose had been dedicated to God. "You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (Mark 7:13; cf. vv. 1-13).

"Many things?" they might have objected. "For instance..."

How about your laws regarding kosher? Jesus asked. "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'" (Mark 7:15).

When the disciples looked puzzled and later asked him what he meant, Jesus elaborated. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." Mark adds significantly, "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'" (Mark 7:18-19).

Jesus continued, "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:20-23). In Matthew Jesus adds, "But eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean'" (Matt. 15:20; cf. vv. 16-20).

Obviously, Jesus was not concerned with external matters but with issues of the heart. So if Jesus was not concerned with external matters, God also is not concerned about them and we should not be either. As I say, this was radical teaching in that day in view of the Jews' well-known and rigorously observed laws of purification.

God is not concerned with what you eat!

But there is something about which God *is* concerned, and that is what comes out of our hearts. That is what makes a man "unclean," said Jesus. If it is not what goes into a person's mouth that defiles the person but what comes out, then we should exercise even more care than the ancient Jews did to get, have, and keep a pure heart. Our hearts are not pure naturally. Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9). But because "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26), my heart and your heart can be changed. They can be changed by Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what we should be concerned about. If we had any idea how impure our own hearts were and were concerned about them, we would be far less inclined to scorn and judge other believers.

Points for the "Strong" Believer

How do we get over our natural but destructive tendency to scorn or judge believers who do not behave exactly like we do? In these verses Paul gives several truths from which to start.

1. *The other Christian does not answer to you but to God.* Paul teaches this when he asks the self-styled "strong" believer, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant" (v. 4).

Why is it so hard for us to realize this? We understand how this works in everyday life. If you run a business and have people reporting to you, you have a right to determine their work goals, hours, terms of compensation, and performance standards. Your employees are accountable to you. But people who work for your competitor, the business down the street, or your neighbor are not accountable to you. You may not like what they are doing. You may disapprove of their objectives or work. But what they do is none of your business.

It is exactly the same in Christianity. I do not mean by this that we should not have a mutual concern for one another. Jesus taught that we are our brother's keeper (read the story of the Good Samaritan), and if that is true of other people in general, it is certainly true of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to pray for them, help them, urge them on, and do everything possible to see that they do well and succeed as Christians. But this does not include scorning them or judging them if in Jesus' service they see things differently and act differently than you do. This is because they do not answer to you. They answer to Jesus. Therefore, leave it with him. And remember that Jesus cares about them and is more concerned that they live an upright, strong, and spiritually profitable life than you are.

2. *God has already accepted the other Christian as he or she is.* We know this by definition since a Christian is one who stands before God not on the basis of his or her own righteousness but because of the work of Jesus Christ. Since the other believer has been accepted and not rejected by Jesus, you should accept him or her too.

This does not mean that everything the other Christian does is right any more than everything you do is right. But it means that the Christian is accepted because of Christ's death on his or her behalf and the gift of Christ's righteousness to such a one by God. In other words, the basis of his or her acceptance is not works. If you are making the other person's acceptance (by you or, as your own conduct implies, by God) depend on what he or she is doing, you are operating on the basis of salvation by works and are denying the gospel.

You do not have to agree that everything the other person is doing is right, any more than he has to agree that everything you are doing is right. But it does mean that you have to accept the person as a believer with whom you must be in fellowship, because God has himself accepted him, just as he has accepted you. In the last study I pointed out that the same word that is used in verse 1, where we are told to "accept" him whose faith is weak, is used in verse 3 of God's acceptance of us and in 15:7 of Christ's acceptance of us. So it is because God has accepted us that we are to accept others. Moreover, since *we* are accepted by grace apart from our works, obviously we need to accept other believers on the same basis.

We have to remember that "it is by grace [we all] have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

3. *The other Christian stands by the grace of God, just as you do.* Let's remember that it is also by grace that we stand and function in the Christian life. Paul indicates this when he says, "To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (v. 4).

Some commentators take this matter of standing or falling as referring to the final judgment because the words are often used in that context, but this is not what is in view here. "Acceptance" *does* refer to the basis on which we stand before God or are justified. We are accepted because of Christ's death here, and we will be accepted exactly for that reason at the final judgment. But as far as standing or falling is concerned, this is

in the context of the servant's relationship to his master and of the master's ability to bear him or her up. It is a promise that Jesus will be with his people, that he has useful and important work for them to do, and that he will see that they are kept upright to accomplish it.

If Jesus feels that the other believer needs to change something about how he is living in order to accomplish the work he has ordained for him to do, Jesus will see to the change. You can't bring it about by yourself anyway. But if in the meantime Jesus does not bother to change that conduct, then it does not matter to him and is not hurting what he has appointed the other one to do. As a matter of fact, it is possible that what you are so concerned about does not matter under any circumstances—simply because you and I tend to get hung up on things that do not matter while we overlook the things that do.

Remember that Jesus told the Pharisees, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matt. 23:23). The Pharisees would have looked down on the common people, who perhaps failed to tithe rigorously. But they had no trouble breaking scores of their other laws in order to arrest, try, and dispose of Jesus Christ.

4. *You too are accountable to God.* Finally, we need to remember that it is not only the other

Christian who is going to give an account to God, but you will have to do it too. In one place Jesus said that you will have to give an account even of every careless word you have spoken (Matt. 12:36).

If that is true, don't you think you have enough to be concerned about without trying to straighten out the other Christian? Of course, no one is always right in everything he or she does, but let Jesus worry about straightening the other Christian out, especially in those areas that probably don't really matter anyway. In the meantime, worry about your own accountability and determine that, regardless of the case of others,

when you stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ you will hear him say of you, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

Chapter 211.
Holy Days or Holy People?

Romans 14:5-6

It is sad to think about the things that have divided Christians. In the Middle Ages the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches of the church divided over the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed. The words mean "and the Son," and the point in dispute was whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from both the first and second persons of the Trinity. At the time of the Reformation the Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists divided over how Christ was thought to be present in the Lord's Supper. Luther's followers insisted on the Roman Catholic view, that the communion bread and wine are transformed literally into the body and blood of Christ. "*Hoc est corpus meum* ('This is my body')," insisted Luther. The Zwinglians understood the Lord's Supper to be a remembrance service only. They emphasized, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Calvin spoke of a "real presence" of Jesus, but insisted that it was a spiritual and not a physical presence.

It is sad that these divisions took place, but at least these were over theological or biblical issues. The matters Paul mentions in Romans 14 are not even great theological issues: what kind of food should be eaten or whether Christians should set aside special days for their religious observances. Paul's point is that issues like these should never divide Christians, that differences of conviction here must be respected. Unfortunately, these matters do divide us, and those who disagree often look down on one another. **Divisions over Days**

We have already looked at the issue of eating meat or not, and we have seen that Paul says that which a Christian chooses doesn't matter.

His second example, in verses 5 and 6, is about observing special days as holy.

I pointed out in chapter 209 that this matter is also mentioned by Paul in Galatians 4:10-11 and in Colossians 2:16-17. In those verses he denounces special day observances: "You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Gal. 4:10-11), and "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

It is different here in Romans. In Galatians and Colossians the people Paul is writing against wanted to mingle diet or celebrations of days with grace as a way of salvation, and that was "a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal. 1:6-7). It had to be opposed. By contrast, the people Paul is thinking about in Romans 14 were not observing diet or days as a way to get to heaven but were doing it because they were convinced that it was necessary to obey or please God.

It is significant that Paul drops the terms "weak" and "strong" at this point. This suggests that the issue he is dealing with now is even less a part of a mature understanding of the gospel than eating meat or being a vegetarian. For now it is not even a question of weakness or strength, but only different ideas of what will please God.

Yet, it is still a contemporary and divisive issue. Even today it produces divisions and distrust. In our day the focus is mostly on what day of the week Christians should worship God and how they should keep that day. There are three main views.

1. *Saturday or Sabbath worship.* Some Christians hold that we should worship on Saturday since this is the biblical day, according to their view. This is the position of the Seventh-Day Adventists, for example, and of some others.

2. *Sunday worship but as the Sabbath.* The second position is that Christians are to worship on Sunday but that Sunday should be the equivalent of the Old Testament Sabbath, meaning that Christians are to observe it as the Jews observed Saturday. The Westminster Confession of Faith takes this view, calling the Lord's Day "the Christian Sabbath." It says that "this Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts, about their worldly enjoyments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy" (Chapter XXI, Sections 7, 8).

This was the view of the English and American Puritans. It is held by many in the Reformed churches today.

3. *Sunday worship as a new "Lord's Day."* This view holds that the Sabbath has been abolished by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that a new day, the Lord's Day, which has its own characteristics, has replaced it. This was the view of John Calvin, who said that "the day sacred to the Jews was set aside" and that "another was appointed" for it. This is my position also.

Differences on this matter are divisive in some cases. The most serious conflicts within my denomination, the conservative Presbyterian Church in America, are between those who insist on a strict adherence to the Westminster Standards, with its "Sabbatarian" view, and others who hold to the Standards more loosely, at least at this point, and agree instead with Calvin that Sunday has replaced the Sabbath. In our denomination there are people who would like to get pastors like me excluded, because we think this is a nonessential matter on which the Westminster Confession of Faith simply has gone beyond what ought to be required of anyone.

The Sabbatarian Position

What should we think of this disagreement? Let's take the Sabbatarian position, first of all. In the
Presbyterian church, the strength of this position is not in the fact that it is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, though some use that as a club to try to force other people to adopt their position, but rather that it is found in the Bible, in fact, in the Ten Commandments. If it is found in the Ten Commandments, it must be binding on us just as the other commandments are, these people argue.

The fourth commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, not your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exod. 20:8-11). The reasoning is that if God has set the seventh day apart as something holy and has given instructions as to how it should be observed, then we must observe it.

There are some good arguments against this view, of course, which I have developed elsewhere. I have argued that the Sabbath was a uniquely Jewish institution, that there is no evidence that it was ever observed by any other ancient race or nation, and that it was observed for the first time by Israel only after the people had received the law at Sinai. It is true that Genesis 2:2-3 says that on the seventh day God "rested from all his work" and that he therefore "blessed the seventh day and made it holy," but it doesn't say he did it then. And there is no indication that Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or any of the patriarchs observed or even knew about the Sabbath.

In fact, we read in Nehemiah, "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. *You made known to them your holy Sabbath*" (Neh. 9:13-14). This implies that the

Sabbath was not known to Israel before Sinai but was part of the special arrangements God made with Israel then for the ordering of the life of that unique nation.

Similarly, Exodus 31:13 calls the Sabbath "a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy." And later, "It will be *a sign between me and the Israelites forever*" (v. 17). This portrays the Sabbath as something established between God and Israel only.

It's important to remember that an emphasis on Sabbath-keeping leads easily to harmful legalism. It clearly did among the Jews. In fact, this was the first (and later proved to be the ultimately fatal) point of contention between the Jewish leaders and Jesus Christ. Neither he nor his disciples held to the leaders' strict ideas of how the Sabbath should be observed, and when Jesus was challenged at the point of his "unorthodox" behavior, he replied by telling these legalists, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In saying this, he pointed to the limited value of the seventh day, even as they observed it, and at the same time asserted his right to amend its observance or even abolish it or replace it if he wished.

The Pharisees didn't agree with him on this. In fact, they hated him for striking at something that was especially dear to them, and as a result they plotted to kill him. Mark tells us that it was on the basis of this issue and after he had healed a man on the Sabbath that the Pharisees first "began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (Mark 3:6). Even today, people who insist on a strict Sabbath tend to be legalistic in other matters also.

Sunday as a New "Lord's Day"

What about the alternate view, then, that Sunday is a new day of Christian worship and that it has characteristics different from the Sabbath? This is my view, and I have what I believe are good reasons for it. For example, although the word *sabbath* is found nine times in

Acts, not once is it said to have been a day observed by Christians. Acts 1:12 uses the phrase "a Sabbath day's walk [journey]." In chapter 13 the word occurs four times in describing how Paul used the Sabbath for his evangelistic ends, going into the synagogues to preach to Jews who were assembled there (vv. 14, 27, 42, 44). Similar references occur in chapters 15 (v. 21), 17 (v. 2), and 18 (v. 4). Nowhere is it said that the church met on the Sabbath or that Christians even thought of their own day, Sunday, as being like or continuing the Sabbath.

Nor did they observe Sunday as the Jews observed Saturday. The Jews abstained from all work. But to judge from the early records, the Christians used Sunday as a day of vigorous spiritual activity and observed it not with long faces but with thanksgiving and joy.

Although the danger of the Sabbatarian position is that it leads to legalism, observing the Lord's
Day freely can lead to libertinism—that is, to a complete disregard of the day so that, although Christians are not bound to any special form of activity, many do nothing. They even fail to go to church or go only in a perfunctory way, to get the "duty" over with quickly so they can spend the rest of the day on worldly activities.

Let me say that I do not believe you are "breaking the Sabbath" by eating out on Sunday, playing ball with your children, going to a football game, or even going to a movie. But surely we are missing the boat if Sunday is not a day of spiritual refreshment, an evangelistic opportunity, hours of genuine worship, and a time of joy for us.

Three Guidelines from Romans

Having given both the pros and cons of these two main views—I have overlooked Saturday worship as a minority view that does not affect very many of today's Christians—let me say here that, just as in the case of whether Christians are free to eat meat or should be vegetarians, the important point of Romans 14 is that Paul does not take sides on the issue. He does not rule on the Sabbath question.

So I am not going to insist on my view either. I have friends who think differently. In fact, one of my best friends, a pastor, observes Sunday by eliminating all worldly activities, spending the time after services either in visiting his people and the sick, or in Bible study, prayer, or other reading. How could I possibly suggest that the way he keeps the "Sabbath" is wrong? It isn't. He is serving the Lord by what he does. At the same time, he does not look down on those who, like me, are engaged in so many "Sabbath" activities that we can hardly think of resting until sometime on Monday.

What Paul does give are three helpful guidelines in this area.

1. *Each must be convinced in his or her own mind.* Notice that verse 5 does not say, "Let everyone do what he or she feels is right, because, after all, the person is convinced in his or her own mind." He does not say the person involved is convinced and therefore should not be challenged, but rather that he should be convinced. This means that Paul is willing to treat each believer as a responsible, thinking person, not merely one to be led about docilely by a selfstyled "stronger" believer. Therefore, we have a responsibility, each one of us, to search out these matters for ourselves.

The words "in his own mind" are important too. For we remember that this last section of Romans began with an emphasis on the mind, saying that a Christian is not to be conformed "any longer to the pattern of this world" but to be transformed by mind renewal (Rom. 12:2).

There is no escaping our individual responsibility. It is not enough to say, "Well, I grew up in a church where no one paid any special attention to Sunday," or "My pastor is a strict Sabbatarian, so I suppose I should be also," or "Since it doesn't really matter, I just won't think about it; I'll drift along." Paul is not condemning anyone, but the reason he is not saying that either position is wrong is that he considers Christians to be responsible, thinking individuals who should be working through each of these matters for themselves. If we are really

doing this, perhaps we will even come to a new sense of agreement or at least cooperation on these matters.

2. *It is possible to serve the Lord either way.* This must be a major emphasis of Paul's, because he repeats the idea three times in verse 6 alone: "He who regards one day as special, does so *to the Lord.* He who eats meat, eats *to the Lord,* for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so *to the Lord* and gives thanks to God."

In this verse Paul brings the two examples of diet and the keeping of days together and says that it is possible to serve the Lord either way in either area. The person who is a vegetarian for religious reasons is (or should be) so because he believes that this is a testimony to God. He does not want to eat meat that has been offered to idols, for instance, or perhaps because he considers life, even the life of animals, to be sacred. On the other hand, the person who eats anything receives his more abundant meals as having come from God and he rejoices that religion does not really consist in eating or not eating. He knows, as Paul says just a few verses further on in chapter 14, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (v. 17).

And what about the observance of special days? The one who stops all worldly activity on Sunday does so in order to serve the Lord, in his case by worship, study, and acts of mercy. The one who is free to do anything should do what he or she does in order to serve God too.

The critical question is this: Are you really serving God by what you do? Does Sunday really count for you in your Christian life and walk? Are you using it well? Do you benefit from it? And for that matter, how about the other days of the week? Are you serving God in those days too, as you should? If you are in a job where you cannot serve God, should you get out of it? It is probably the case that you should simply learn to do whatever you are doing for God's glory. Are you doing that? It is important that you answer these questions. You are not called to be a robot. You are to be a significant, thinking Christian.

3. *The diagnostic question: Can you be thankful?* Paul mentions the matter of serving the Lord three times in verse 6, but he also speaks of giving "thanks to God" twice. He mentions it in connection with eating either meat or vegetables because we naturally and rightly give thanks at mealtimes. But it should also be true of anything we do or do not feel led to do, including how we conduct ourselves on Sunday. This third guideline cuts two ways.

First, if the other Christian is giving thanks to God for his food or for the line of work or conduct into which he has been led, then his thanks to God should be proof to you that he is doing it "unto the Lord." This takes us back to verse 4: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." If he is serving the Lord, then you should keep out of his way and allow God to work through the other believer as he sees fit.

Second, the principle of giving thanks is a great help for discerning what we ourselves should do in doubtful situations. What may I do in such and such a situation where the Bible is not explicit or at least where I do not understand how it is explicit? One very good answer is this: Can you enjoy it in the Lord and give thanks for it? The Swiss commentator F. Godet asks, "May I allow myself this or that pleasure? Yes, if I can enjoy it to the Lord, and while giving him thanks for it; no, if I cannot receive it as a gift from his hand, and bless him for it. This mode of solution respects at once the rights of the Lord and those of individual liberty."

And while I am at it, let me say that even the Jewish Sabbath, for all its tendency toward legalism, was meant to be a time of thanksgiving and joy for Israel. Here is how Isaiah writes about it in chapter 58:

> *If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day,*

if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD'S holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.

Isaiah 58:13-14

I do not see how any child of God could desire more from God than that.

Chapter 212.
God, Other People, and Ourselves

Romans 14:7-9

There are not many people who have studied seventeenth-century English prose literature even if they were English majors in college. But I had a good college course on it and found the prose of that time to be a treasure.

That was the century of John Donne, best known for his "Songs and Sonnets." But Donne became a preacher and also wrote great sermons as well as other prose literature. Among his prose writings are some "Meditations" he composed while confined to bed recovering from a serious illness. At one point he heard a church bell ringing the death toll of some other person, and he reasoned that it is never merely for other people the bell rings. Since each of us is mortal, it rings for us. Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the maine; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends, or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Those last words are well known. They are the source of the title of one of Ernest Hemingway's best known novels, for example. But they come to mind now not because of Hemingway, but because of Paul's teaching in Romans 14:7-8: "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

The Believer and Other People

In this passage the apostle is reflecting not so much on a Christian's relationship to other people—being a part of the much greater community of mankind or of the body of believers—as John Donne did, but rather on each Christian's relationship to God. That is, he is saying not that we belong to one another but that we belong to Jesus. Most commentators point this out.

Yet it is also true that we belong to one another, Christians to other Christians, and this is also appropriate to the context of Romans 14. That those who belong to Christ also belong to one another is a natural extension of what Paul has been saying in verses 1-6, for he said there that Christians are to respect the convictions and spiritual experience of others, meaning that they are not to harm them. Moreover, the fact that we belong to one another is also connected to what follows, for beginning with verse 13 Paul says that for the sake of other believers we ought to abstain from some things we consider permissible.

What you do affects others. Therefore you are not acting in isolation when you either live for Christ or fail to live for him.

This is said many times in the Bible, including numerous occasions in Paul's writings. But one passage that says it exceptionally well is 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, where Paul compares the church to a human body:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were

all baptized by one Spirit into one body— whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

... If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body....

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.... But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

It might go far to establish us in godliness and cause us to live for Christ wholeheartedly if we really understood that in one way or another everything we do, whether for good or ill, always affects other Christians, usually beginning with those who are closest to us.

The Believer and God

Yet the world can say much of this quite apart from the biblical revelation. It is commonplace today to talk about living in a global village so that what we do in America in terms of our economics or morals or politics affects, for example, what happens to people in Japan or Brazil or Eastern Europe. If we raise tariffs on imports from South America so that the sales of certain products are reduced and American products are protected, we hurt the livelihood of poor people there. If we make morally degenerative movies and export them to the world, as we are doing, the harmful moral climate of America damages countless other people.

What is profound in Paul's teaching is that none of us is isolated from God with the result that what we do in terms of that vertical relationship deeply affects how we either help or harm other people.

Notice the threefold repetition of the words "to the Lord" in verse 8. "If we live, we live *to the Lord;* and if we die, we die *to the Lord.* So, whether we live or die, we belong *to the Lord."* The point is that we are to be in a right relationship to the Lord and serve the Lord in everything — indeed, everything we do is related to God in one way or another, either good or bad and whether or not we realize it—so that we do not hurt other people.

Not long ago I heard an illustration of this principle that showed how those who are not Christians sometimes understand this better than some believers. The first king to unite the warring tribes of the great Arabian peninsula was King 'Abd al-'Aziz. He ruled in the earlier years of this century and died in 1951. In the late 1930s and early 1940s American oil companies were starting to develop the great Arabian oil fields, and this meant that many foreigners, particularly Americans, were beginning to move into this strongly Islamic country. Some of them were Christians, and early in this development a number of expatriates approached the Saudi king to ask if they could establish churches in Arabia. He said he would think about it, telling them to come back in several weeks for his answer.

About a week later, another group of oil company employees came to the king to ask if they could have alcohol in the company camps. Alcohol is forbidden to Moslems. The king replied by a question. He asked the Americans, "If you could have either churches or alcohol, which of the two would you choose?"

This became an important issue for the company, and the answer was debated carefully. At last the Americans returned and said they would prefer to have the alcohol. King 'Abd al-'Aziz replied, "If you had said churches, I would have given you permission to have both. But since you chose alcohol, you can have neither." In his own way, this wise Moslem ruler understood that if people are right with God, they can be

expected to order life in a responsible way not only for themselves but also for other people. But if, on the contrary, they will not submit to God, they cannot be trusted to care for one another.

Living for God

Our text tells us that believers in Christ do not live to themselves but "to the Lord" and that they die "to the Lord" too. What does this mean? Let's start with the purpose of our being here on earth.

The best known Christian answer to our purpose here is the one found in the first response of the
Westminster Shorter Catechism. The catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" It answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." The catechism teaches that our chief purpose in life is not our own self-fulfillment or the achievement of a sense of self-worth or even helping others, important as that may be, but the glory of God. That is, God must always come first in everything, for he *is* first. He is the first and greatest of all realities. As Paul wrote in the great doxology that ends Romans 11, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (v. 36). Therefore, in the most literal sense, each of us is to live "to the Lord."

But strikingly and brilliantly, the catechism also adds the words "and to enjoy him forever," thereby indicating that this living to God or pursuit of God's glory is not a painful, self-denying, grim, or grievous thing, but rather a joy and delight for those who do it.

I have been greatly blessed in this respect by some reading I have been doing recently in the writings of John Piper, the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Piper is insistent that the glory of God is the end of life and indeed of all creation. But he also insists that we are to enjoy God and even that the way in which we best glorify God *is* by enjoying him. In a book titled *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* Piper writes:

God's deepest purpose for the world is to fill it with reverberations of his glory in the lives of a new humanity, ransomed from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 5:9). But the glory of God does not reflect brightly in the hearts of men and women when they cower unwillingly in submission to his authority or when they obey in servile fear or when there is no gladness in response to the glory of their king.

... When God sends his emissaries to declare, "Your God reigns!" his aim is not to constrain man's submission by an act of raw authority; his aim is to ravish our affections with irresistible displays of glory. The only submission that fully reflects the worth and glory of the King is glad submission. Begrudging submission berates the King. No gladness in the subject, no glory to the King.

No one of the world's people has any idea what this means, of course. On the contrary, the world is determined instead to suppress all true knowledge of God and live for self (Rom. 1:18-32). This way of living leads downhill so that we begin to act like beasts. And we not only do what the animals do, being beastlike in our behavior, we do things the animals would not do. The only way we ever learn to live uprightly and actually experience the power to live uprightly is when we live our lives to the Lord.

R. C. Sproul, the founder and president of Ligonier Ministries, has adopted the Latin phrase *coram deo* as the title of a column in his monthly publication *Table Talk.* It means "before God" or "before the face of God" or "in the light of God's all-seeing presence." That is the idea we are dealing with here. Only the Christian can and does live *coram deo*. In fact, he or she must live for God, for this is one thing being a Christian truly means. The non-Christian does not live *coram deo*. On the contrary, it can be said of him that his chief end is to glorify himself and to enjoy himself forever.

There is one more matter here. This way of living, that is, living "to the Lord," will enable us to take whatever comes into our lives as from the Lord and enable us to live each moment for him. John Calvin saw the importance of this and wrote about it in his treatment of our text:

God claims such power over life and death that every individual is to bear his own condition in life as a yoke laid on him by God. It is just that God should assign to every man his station and course in life. In this way we are not only forbidden to attempt to do anything hastily without a command from God, but we are also commanded to be patient in all trouble and loss. If, therefore, the flesh at any time shrinks from adversity, let us remember that a man who is not free and master of himself perverts law and order if he does not depend on the will of his Lord.

Calvin knew that if we live "to the Lord," we will be able to receive everything "from the Lord" joyfully and with thanksgiving.

Dying to God

Verse 8 also says that if we are believers in Christ, we also "die to the Lord." The phrase embraces two things.

1. *The manner of our deaths.* One thing "dying to the Lord" means is that the way in which we are called to die is from God and therefore we can trust the manner of our deaths to him. Not long ago I was with a man who was two weeks from retirement. He was thinking about what was going to happen to him in the future, and he talked about dying. "The desirable thing is to die all at once and not in pieces," he said. I suppose that is right. It *is* desirable. I have always said that I would prefer to die in a plane crash. But death does not always come all at one time. Sometimes it does come in pieces, and it usually does if we live long enough. Our eyesight fails, then our hearing. Our memories begin to fade. Parts of our body break down—our hearts, kidneys, lungs. Our muscles weaken. In our day, with our advances in medicine, it is possible to be kept alive for ten or twenty years even though we may be little more than a noncommunicating invalid, completely confined to a wheelchair, or even worse.

How are we to think about such things as Christians? The answer, if we believe God to be sovereign in our deaths as well as over our lives, is

that we can receive all these circumstances as being from him and can serve and love him in whatever conditions we are. The world cannot even think of doing this, but Christians can. Believers can do all things to God's glory.

2. *The timing of our deaths.* The second way in which we can "die to the Lord" concerns the timing of our deaths. Sometimes Christians live out full and useful lives and die in mature old age. At other times Christians die in the midst of life, often leaving a wife, husband, or children behind. Sometimes they die young. Sometimes Christians even die as children. How are we to think about this? Are we to consider the death of the young believer a tragedy? Is it a cosmic mistake? We can never think this way if we believe in God's sovereignty! If God is truly sovereign, he must be as sovereign over the timing of our deaths as the manner of them and as over life itself.

Speaking of our text, Calvin said, "Thus too we are taught the rule by which to live and die, so that if he [God] lengthens out life in the midst of continual sorrow and weariness, we are not to seek to depart before our time. But if he should suddenly recall us in the prime of our life, we must always be ready for our departure."

Jesus, the Lord of All

The last phrase of verse 8 and the whole of verse 9 are written to strengthen our belief in God's sovereignty, for they tell us that if we are Christians, "we belong to the Lord" and that it was to make this possible that Jesus "died and returned to life," that is, rose again.

There is a sense in which Jesus is and has always been the Lord of all things. For Jesus is God, and lordship actually means God's sovereignty. There is nothing in all creation nor anything that has ever happened in all the history of the earth or universe over which Jesus has not been Lord. Yet Paul is writing here about Jesus' special lordship over his own saved people, and he is saying that he has become their Lord by dying for them and then rising again. By his death he achieved their

deliverance from sin's dread penalty and power, and by his resurrection he has established an ongoing relationship with them by which he guides, protects, and saves them day by day until they come at last to be with him in heaven.

The Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with a question about the resurrection. They were the liberals of their day, and they thought belief in a physical resurrection was foolish. Jesus told them they had erred for two reasons. First, they did not know the Bible, which taught that there is a resurrection. And second, they did not know the power of God that makes resurrections and any other supposedly impossible thing possible. The Scripture he quoted was Exodus 3:6, where God declares, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of
Jacob." Because the verb "I am" is in the present tense, not the past, Jesus concluded that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must still be alive, since God "is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matt. 22:29).

That is exactly what we have in Romans 14, except that now the chapter is talking about the second person of the Trinity rather than the first. It tells us that Jesus is "Lord of both the dead and the living" (v. 9). In other words, those who are his belong to him now and will still belong to him in the future, beyond death. They will belong to him forever.

Something very important happened to me between the preaching of the sermon that appears as the previous chapter and the preparation of this study. It was the death of my father. He had been failing for some time, particularly in his mind. But his death nevertheless came suddenly, and within a few days my mother, sisters, and I had arranged for a double funeral—one in Hamilton, Massachusetts, where my parents had been living, and a second one in Philadelphia, where my father was to be buried. Everyone came—my mother, my parents' children, their children, and their children's children, four generations in all. When we were all together there were four pews of descendants from this one marriage, every one of them professing to believe on Jesus Christ as his or her Savior.

One of my associates conducted the funeral; but I was also to speak, and I was mulling over of what I might say when my mind ran ahead to these verses: "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living."

When I thought of them it seemed to me that this was exactly what needed to be said. For this is the sole but nevertheless extraordinary comfort for all who know Jesus Christ in this life. If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, whichever it is, we are the Lord's. Do you know any comfort equal to that? I don't. Our sole comfort is that we belong to Jesus Christ. But because of who he is, that is also a great and all-sufficient comfort. Because we know Jesus to be a wise and utterly sovereign God, we can trust him with whatever comes into our lives and with the manner and timing of our deaths, too. Do you trust him? You can. I commend him to you as a trustworthy Savior.

Chapter 213.
Answerable to God

Romans 14:10-12

In the fourteenth chapter of Romans Paul has been explaining why Christians must not be judgmental where the conduct of other believers is concerned, and one of the reasons he has given is that none of us exists in isolation. We belong to each other and need each other. Moreover, being Christians, we belong to God. So we must not spend our time putting the other Christian down but rather we must accept as brothers and sisters those who are also trying to serve the Lord as best they know how and try earnestly to build up those other persons.

Paul argued that "none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone" (Rom. 14:7). In the last study I cited John Donne's

"No Man Is an Island" to make that point.

But there is one situation in which a man or woman *is* isolated, and that is when he or she stands before the judgment seat of God, as we each must do. On that day there will be no pleading someone else's responsibility for what we have done or blaming another person for our faults or taking another's credit for our own. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that *each one may receive what is due him* for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). If nothing else is able to get us thinking about our conduct rather than someone else's, it should be this extremely serious, awesome, and inescapable moment of personal accountability.

Christians Must Give an Accounting

Our text is referring to Christians when it says, "For we will all stand before God's judgment seat" (v. 10). It is true that unbelievers will also be judged at the final judgment, but that is not what Paul is writing about here. In this chapter he is reminding his readers that Christians will also be judged, since *all* must appear before God and give an accounting.

I am sure this does not seem right to many Christians, because they understand rightly that because they have trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior they have passed from a state of being under judgment or condemnation to one of being justified before God. Even more, they remember how Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal
life and will not be condemned [the King James Version said, 'shall not come into
condemnation']; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). If that is true, how can a Christian possibly be judged? Or to think about Paul's words in Romans 14, how can the apostle say, speaking specifically of Christians, "We will all stand before God's judgment seat"?

The answer, of course, is that there are various judgments spoken of in the Bible and that the word *judge* is used in various ways.

Whenever we speak of the judgments mentioned in the Bible we are moving into the area of Bible prophecy, and this is an area in which Christians have very different views. (It is another area in which we need to be unusually understanding and accepting of one another.) However, as I read the Bible it seems to me that at least seven different judgments are mentioned: (1) a judgment of believers at the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10); (2) a series of judgments on the earth (Rev. 6-11, 15-16); (3) a judgment of the beast and the false prophet, at which time the devil will be imprisoned (Rev. 19:20; 20:1-3); (4) a judgment of the Gentile nations (Ps. 2); (5) a judgment of Israel (Ezek. 20:32-38); (6) the final judgment of Satan (Rev. 20:1-10); and (7) the final judgment of unbelievers at the Great White Throne (Rev. 20:11-15).

All these judgments except the first are judicial judgments: They involve God's punishments of individuals or nations for those peoples' specific sins. The punishments involve spiritual or eternal death and hell suffering. The first of these judgments stands apart from the rest, because it is a judgment of believers, which means that it is not for sin and does not involve spiritual death or suffering. Nevertheless, it is still a real judgment in which the followers of Christ are to give

an accounting for what they have done in this life and are either rewarded or disapproved by God on that basis.

It helps to get a picture of what this involves by realizing that the phrases in Romans 14:10 rendered "God's judgment seat" and in 2 Corinthians 5:10 rendered "the judgment seat of Christ" each contain the Greek word *bêma*, which refers not to the judge's seat in a court of law but to the bench upon which the referees or judges sat at an athletic contest. It was the place from which those who did well in the contest and triumphed were rewarded with a laurel wreath and from which those who broke the rules were disqualified or disapproved.

This was a well-known concept for the ancient Greeks and Romans, and Paul drew on it more than once in his writings. Thus, although Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 are the only two verses in which the word *bêma* actually is used, we find Paul alluding to this idea elsewhere as well:

1. *1 Corinthians 9:25-27.* "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."
2. *Philippians 3:12-14.* "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."
3. *2 Timothy 4:7-8.* "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

The man who wrote Romans 8:38-39 ("For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord") is not worrying about his eternal salvation. He is not afraid that he may be sent to hell. But he is aware that he is going to have to give an account to God of every word he has spoken and everything he has done. And he is taking that moment of personal accountability very, very seriously.

You Must Give an Accounting

We can see how seriously he takes this by the way he writes about it in Romans 14:10-12. Notice three things. First, he emphasizes the word *you* by putting it in an emphatic position and repeating it twice. This is more obvious in the Greek text than in the English translations, but the New International Version tries to capture the idea by asking in verse 10, "*You,* then, why do *you* judge your brother?" Paul is referring both to the one whom he called weak earlier and to the one he called strong. That is, he is writing to *you,* whoever you may be.

Second, Paul brings in a quotation from the Old Testament, which he often does when he comes to the end of an argument:

It is written:

> *"'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,*
> *'Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'"*

This quotation is taken somewhat loosely from Isaiah 49:23 (see Isa. 49:18), and it is a solemn reminder of how God has said that every person who has ever lived will appear before him for judgment. So we must not think that just because we are Christians, somehow we are going to get off without an accounting.

Third, Paul repeats his point in different words but with emphasis in verse 12: "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God." This includes you and me.

Accountable for All Things

But for what will we be held accountable? This is a serious and very practical matter, so let's look at some of the verses that tell exactly what we are accountable for.

1. *We are accountable for every word we have spoken.* There are many verses in the Bible that tell us this. For example, Jesus spoke about how words come from the heart, a good heart producing good words and a bad heart producing bad words. He said, "I tell you that men will have

to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:36-37). In the letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs" (Eph. 4:29) and "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving" (Eph. 5:4).

This does not mean that a Christian can never laugh or tell jokes. We do not have to be serious all the time. But it does mean that there should be a certain gravity about us as befits those who are aware of the gospel of the grace of God and of the fact that many are perishing because they will not turn from their sins and believe on Jesus Christ. And even if we laugh and tell jokes, which we will at times, we will not be telling dirty jokes. On the contrary, we will try to edify others even by our humor.

We will pay attention to the words we hear and read too. Donald Grey Barnhouse had some useful thoughts on this in his study of Romans:

I think it is fair and logical to conclude that if the believer must account for every careless word, this applies not only to what he says, but to what he allows himself to hear and read. If you spend several hours a week watching television, you can be almost certain that the thing has mastery over you; but if you watch it only occasionally and in order to relax after a long period of work or study, that is a different matter. I know people who are better acquainted with the comic strips than they are with the Bible. They say that they are too busy for Bible study, but they have at least fifteen minutes a day for the comics and another fifteen to listen to news broadcasts. I read some magazines from back to front, just to laugh at the cartoons, and throw them down without reading any of their articles or stories. However, I am not your judge, and you may not be mine. We are each answerable to the Lord.

There is a positive side to this, however. Although our idle words will be condemned, our public confessions of Jesus Christ and words that are spoken in praise of God to bring him glory will also be remembered

forever. For the text in Matthew also says, "By your words you will be acquitted" (Matt. 12:37).

I have always been encouraged by what is said concerning the people of God who lived in the time of Malachi: "Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name" (Mal. 3:16). This means that God hears our good, faithful, and true words too, and that he remembers them forever. I believe that no word spoken for Jesus or in Jesus' name will ever be wasted or fail of its reward.

2. *We are accountable for the talents that have been given to us.* We should remember the parable Jesus told in various forms in which a king or owner of an estate left cities to be managed by his servants or gave varying numbers of talents to them, returning later to demand an accounting. In one of these, he dismissed the manager, saying, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer" (Luke 16:2). In another he condemned the faithless steward for being "wicked" and "lazy" (Matt. 25:26) but praised the faithful servants, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

Have you ever taken stock of the talents God has given you? I do not mean just your particularly strong points or strong skills, but everything you are. Have you ever done a complete inventory of who you are so that you may give it all to God for his service and glory?

I am a fifty-five-year-old white male whom God called to the ministry at an early age so I would be able to direct every stage of my education to that end. I was raised in a Christian home, taught the Bible from childhood onward, was influenced by strong men and women of God, and was placed in Philadelphia in a strong city church to teach the Bible to the people God sends to serve there. We are called to model city ministry at Tenth Presbyterian Church, and we have done it. Everything

that is good in me has come from God, and my responsibility is to take those good gifts and offer them up to God in his service, making them count for him in every way I can.

That is my inventory. It is that for which I must give an accounting. Your case is different. You have an entirely different background and entirely different training. You may have been called to be a teacher or a doctor or a secretary or the CEO of some company. You may be black or white or some other color. You may have a high IQ or a low IQ. Whatever you have, it has been given to you by God, and you are responsible to God for how you use it. Are you using it for him? If you do not know the answer to that question, you need to sit down quietly, take personal inventory, and ask God to show you what you can do that will make a difference for him in this life and for eternity.

3. *We are accountable for how we use our money.* Nothing in life so mirrors our values and priorities as what we do with our money, which is why someone has said, "Let me look at your checkbook, and I will tell you what you are." What you do with your money tells volumes about you.

This is why the Bible has so much to say about money. It is why Jesus spoke about it. Jesus said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.... No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Matthew 6:19-21, 24

What would I discover if I were to examine your checkbook? You would have payments on the house, checks for the heating and electricity, money for food, hospital and doctors' bills, perhaps education bills—and taxes, of course, lots of taxes. But what beyond

that? Would I find more money being spent on a second home, a luxury car, the country club, or entertainment than for Christian work? What percentage of your income would I find given to the support of your local church? Or to missions? Or to help people you know who are in serious financial need? If you give anything to your church or charitable causes, you probably consider yourself to be very generous, a great philanthropist. But would that judgment hold up to a really objective scrutiny? Would God be satisfied with your priorities?

Earlier I mentioned Donald Grey Barnhouse. In his study he refers to a cartoon in which a farmer is sitting at a table with nine giant potatoes in front of him and a tenth potato, his tithe to God, sitting off by itself. The isolated potato is marked "The Lord's portion," and the caption expresses the words of the farmer who is saying, "I don't see how any fellow could be mean enough to give less."

True enough. The caption is meant to commend the farmer as a man with a surrendered heart.
But I find myself thinking, "Nine for me and one for God? Is even that a strong enough priority? When we have been given so much and have such abundance, is that all we can do, should do, or would do if we really loved the Lord with all our hearts and minds and souls and were aware that one day we will have to give an accounting of how we have spent our money?"

4. *We are accountable for how we have used our time.* Finally, you will have to give an accounting for your time. How are you using your time? Do you waste long hours watching television? Or if you work all the time, are you working for yourself only, or do you work for others and share your time with your family, or with others you could help? Do you invest some of your time in Bible study, witnessing, or some type of Christian work?

What You Do Now Counts

Let's close by returning to the points Paul is making.

1. *Stop judging your neighbor.* Most of us are guilty of this, and it is one of the most harmful things that takes place in Christian churches. We think that because there are standards to be maintained we must be snooping out the shortcomings of others. We are not called to do this. If you are worried about standards, make sure you live up to them yourself. Or let the people God has appointed to deal with them—the elders in a local church—do the shepherding work.

2. *Take inventory of your own actions and behavior.* Unless you are perfect or nearly perfect, which I doubt you are, that will be enough to keep you busy for a very long time, and we will all be better off. Besides, you will help others better that way, because people are always helped more by a loving example of what should be done than by moral nitpicking or outright condemnation.

3. *Do what you can to build up the body.* Being judgmental tears down. Modeling builds up, and that is what we most need. And remember that it is spiritual work that will last. Most of what you have been spending your time on will pass with the passing of this world and be gone forever.

Accountability is always a sobering message. But it is also encouraging, because it means that what you do really counts.

Chapter 214.
Responsible Christianity

Romans 14:13-16

We live in a day when people are impatient with theology. If they are willing to listen to
Christian teaching at all, they want it to be practical. Is it? Well, teaching about the Christian life is practical, and it is the Christian life with which Paul is dealing in this, the last major section of Romans (chaps. 12-16).

Yet the way he does it is surprising. When people ask for practical teaching about how Christians should live, they usually want a list of things Christians should do or not do: read your Bible, come to church, spend quality time with your children, and so on. If their concern is for values or Christian morality, they want a list of rules approaching legalism: Don't smoke. Don't drink. Don't go to bad movies. Don't cheat on your income tax. Have you noticed how little there is of anything like that in these last chapters of Romans? Paul gives commands. Indeed, this is the place in the letter where they are particularly found: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9); "Live at peace with everyone" (v. 18); "Do not take revenge" (v. 19); "Let no debt remain outstanding" (Rom. 13:8). But these are general statements, not a list of practical dos and don'ts, and they are introduced by the important general teaching that the way we are to approach everything is from the perspective of a renewed Christian mind:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:1-2

Is Legalism the Answer?

But what about dos and don'ts? Isn't there a list of things we should do and not do? There is, of course. The Ten Commandments is one important list. Nothing in Paul's writings suggests that we are free to violate the moral law of God. But when he writes about specific details of the Christian life, as he does here, it is important to see that the approach he takes is not legalism. He does not provide a list of acceptable and nonacceptable things, above all not in gray areas. In fact, in these areas he teaches that Christians are free to do anything, and they must allow other Christians to do the same. In other words, the

way to move forward in the Christian life is not for one group of believers to lay down a set of rules for other Christians.

One commentator writes, "We may advise, we may cite our own experiences, we may pray, we may point to the Word of God, we may seek to enlighten, but *we may never command the conscience of another believer*."

How those who know the nature of true Christian freedom are to use their liberty is precisely what Paul discusses in the section of Romans to which we come now. Romans 14:13-15:13 is the second part of a long section in which Paul addresses the way Christians are to relate to others with whom they disagree on some matters. The first part was about how people who disagree on such matters are to treat each other (Rom. 14:1-12). The second part is about how the "strong" are to use their liberty (Rom. 14:13-15:13). In other words, the first part deals with Christian liberty itself, the second part with how it should be exercised.

The key concept is *responsibility.* We are free as Christians, but we must use our freedom in a way that supports, helps or builds up the other person, not in a way that harms him or tears him down.

The Basic Principle: Verse 13

Verse 13 is a restatement of the principle Paul has been explaining from the start—we must stop passing judgment on one another. It is something he has been saying to both the weak and the strong. The "weak" brother or sister is the one who is bothered by scruples over things that should not matter. The person he calls "strong" is the one who knows that in principle what one does in these areas really doesn't matter.

Paul has provided two examples of what he is talking about: first, care about what one eats— believing that a Christian should not eat meat but should be a vegetarian; second, a scrupulous observance of days. This involved the Jewish passion for the faithful observance of the Sabbath, new moons, and other feast days mentioned in the Old Testament.

These matters do not mean much to most people today, so in our first study of this section I suggested some modern equivalents: (1) the judgmental way some Christians look at others who are going through hard times, reasoning that the other person must have done something wrong for which he or she is being punished; (2) variations in individual piety, some practices or lack of them being judged "unspiritual" by those who think otherwise; (3) denominational affiliations, some being judged apostate by narrower brethren; and (4) personality differences—because some people are shy and cannot speak easily about their faith to other people, they are often thought to be unspiritual or even disobedient believers.

Scripture does not give us merely negative commands, but also gives us positive injunctions, which is the case here. In the Greek text of verse 13 the word *judge* is used twice. In the first case, the verse tells us to stop judging other people. In the second, it tells us to start judging ourselves. This is a word play in the original language that does not work so well in English because our meanings of the word *judge* are more restricted. This is why the New International Version translates the verse as it does. The King James Version was more literal: "Let us not therefore *judge* one another any more; *hut judge* this rather..." The NIV conveys the idea better when it departs from the literal rendering and says, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."

Here the best recourse may be a paraphrase. Ray Stedman does this: "Scripture does not merely say, 'Stop judging'; it says, 'Stop judging others; if you want to judge, start with yourself.' " I referred to this in chapter 209 when I wrote, "You have better things to do than to hunt out the speck in the eye of your fellow Christian while overlooking the plank in your own."

When Paul says, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another," he is speaking to both the weak and the strong believer. The weak are not to judge the strong by considering them unspiritual, and the strong are not to judge the weak by considering them immature.

This picks up on what was said in the first section of the chapter and is a natural bridge to what follows.

At this point, however, Paul becomes more directive, speaking to those who considered themselves to be strong, saying, "Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way." In fact, from this point on nearly everything he writes is to them. The strong believer has more latitude in these matters and can accommodate the weaker brother, while the weaker brother cannot accommodate him. The weak brother can only abstain from what he believes to be wrong. The strong Christian can either abstain or not abstain. Therefore, he has it within his power to accommodate the other person, which is what Paul tells him to do.

The Underlying Truth: Verse 14

The second verse of this section is a parenthesis. For although Paul will say that the strong believer should forgo what his principles would otherwise permit for the sake of the weaker brother, the underlying truth nevertheless is that the strong believer is right: No food is unclean of itself.

We know that Paul felt this strongly, first because of the way he writes here and also because he has said the same thing explicitly in other letters. Here he appeals to his being "in the Lord Jesus" (v. 14). This does not mean that he has a specific saying of Jesus to appeal to, though he might have been thinking of Christ's words in Mark 7:1-13. It only means that he is close to the Lord and is speaking in accord with Jesus' spirit. In the mouth of an apostle, this is a very close claim to speaking by inspiration.

In 1 Corinthians 8 he answers the Corinthians' questions about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols by writing, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one" (v. 4) and "Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" (v. 8). Similarly, in 1 Timothy 4:4 he says, "Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is

received with thanksgiving." What this means is that, in principle, the strong are right. Nothing that goes into the body defiles the person, only what comes out.

Nevertheless, Paul adds that for the one who thinks something is unclean it truly is. Therefore, for his sake the strong believer should be willing to forgo many things that he would otherwise be able to enjoy because of his own sense of spiritual freedom.

The Strong's Responsibility: Verses 15-16

This brings us to the main point of this passage, but at the same time also to something that must be handled very carefully. To see why we only have to ask this question: Do the strong in faith have to forgo anything about which some weaker believer might object? In a world with so much variety there is hardly anything you or I might do that will not be objected to by some other believer. Moreover, there are believers on both sides of most issues. If we were to listen to what all these other Christians have to say and try to live by their standards, we would either fall into a new legalism or go crazy trying to balance thousands of conflicting claims on our behavior.

William Barclay expresses this well when he writes, "Paul is not saying that we must always allow our conduct to be dominated and dictated by the views, and even the prejudices, of others; there are matters which are essentially matters of principle, and in them a man must take his own way. But there are a great many things which are neutral and indifferent,... and it is Paul's conviction that in such things we have no right to give offence to the more scrupulous brother."

Barclay says, "It is a Christian duty to think of everything, not as it affects ourselves only, but also as it affects others." This is part of what it means for a believer in Christ to be guided by a Christian mind.

At this point let's think about the decree of the first church council described in Acts 15. The question that made the meeting necessary was whether Gentiles, who were becoming Christians in large numbers, needed to be circumcised to be saved. The Jewish legalists thought they

did; after all, circumcision is the Old Testament sign of membership in the covenant people. Paul and his party believed they did not. According to Paul's account of the same council in his letter to the Galatians, Paul had brought along a young Gentile missionary worker named Titus as a test case. Titus, being a Gentile, had not been circumcised. Would he be compelled to be, or would the council come out on the side of pure grace?

We know how the council decided. After much debate Peter gave a strong decisive speech in which he argued, "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:10-11).

This was heeded, and the council adopted the advice of James, the Lord's brother: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (vv. 19-21).

This was done. The council sent a letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, saying, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (vv. 28-29).

This has been judged an unfortunate compromise by some students of the Book of Acts, but it was nothing of the sort. It was a perfect example of the teaching Paul has included in Romans. First and most important, it upheld the cause of Gentile liberty, excluding legalism. It decreed that it was not necessary for Gentiles to become circumcised in order to be saved. Nothing is required but faith in Christ's atoning work. It was because of this that Paul was able to write to the Galatians,

saying that the council had declared for Gentile liberty and that "not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek" (Gal. 2:3).

At the same time, the council showed concern for the consciences of the weaker, Jewish brethren. For that is what three of the four forbidden actions were about. The demand for sexual morality was required by the moral law of God, of course. The Gentiles needed to hear it. But the other three items all had to do with Jewish scruples about food. In writing to the Corinthians Paul says that it does not matter whether an animal has been sacrificed to an idol or not. A Christian is free to eat it. "We are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" (1 Cor. 8:8). But not all Jews saw it this way, and for their sakes the council ruled that Gentiles should avoid practices that were offensive to their Jewish brethren. James made this reasoning explicit when he said, "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21). That is, Jews are found everywhere; their law forbids such practices and we want to win them rather than repel them. Moreover, if they are Christians, we want to live with them within the one strong fellowship of the Christian church.

Strikingly therefore, in the same chapter of Corinthians in which Paul argues that "an idol is nothing" (1 Cor. 8:4) and that "we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" (v. 8), he immediately goes on to say this:

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

The last line is particularly powerful. For Paul, the great champion of Gentile liberty, is not saying merely that he will forgo his privilege to eat meat as long as the scrupulous believer is around, but that he will do it forever if that is what is necessary for the spiritual health of the other believer.

Why the Strong Should Forgo Privileges

But it is hard to see things that way, especially in this day of passionate emphasis upon our own "rights." That is why the last two verses supply such forceful reasons why the advice not to do anything to harm the other believer should be heeded. There are three of them. This is the way John Calvin expresses them in his commentary.

1. *Love is violated if our brother is made to grieve for so slight a reason, for it is contrary to love to cause anyone distress.*

If the truth of the gospel was at stake, Paul would fight to the last ditch to defend it. But if it is not a matter of God's grace in saving sinners, it is clear that the demands of love should override one's personal freedom in peripheral matters. Paul has stressed the demands of Christian love earlier in this section, in chapter 12:9-21 and chapter 13:8-14. "Love does no harm to its neighbor," Paul said (Rom. 13:10). But if this is so and if we do love, then we will not harm our Christian brothers or sisters for so slight a matter as what we eat or drink. To insist on our own way at this point would be selfish at best and most likely be wicked.

2. *The price of the blood of Christ is wasted when a weak conscience is wounded, for the most contemptible brother has been redeemed by the blood of Christ.*

In verse 15, Paul uses a strong word when he says that we are not to "destroy" the brother "for whom Christ died." He does not mean that we might cause our brother to perish eternally by some sin. He means that sin is destructive and that if your actions cause the other person to do what he or she believes to be sinful, then you are harming that person

because for him that behavior is wrong. How can you do that if you understand, as you should, that the other person is one for whom Christ died? Jesus gave his life for that other believer. How can you refuse to give up a merely questionable practice? In this area comparison with our Lord would put most of us to shame.

3. *If the liberty which Christ has attained for us is good, we ought to see that men do not slander it and rightly disparage it when we abuse the gifts of God.*

The *good* of this verse is not the disputed matter that might be spoken of as *evil* by the weaker brother. It is the strong believer's liberty, and the point is that our freedom must not be thought by unbelievers to be merely an excuse for Christian license. We are responsible to God, first of all, but also to our weaker brethren and to the watching world. This is a short life. Its pleasures are passing and will be vastly overshadowed by the far greater pleasures and joys of heaven. Should we not willingly give up a little more here for the sake of that which is eternal, and that others might be saved?

Chapter 215.
God's Kingdom

Romans 14:17

One of the saddest things about church history is that early Christian leaders forgot that the kingdom of God is not the exercise of civil authority but "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" and began to contend for civil power over the bodies and consciences of men.

We think of the scene on Christmas day in 800 a.d. when Pope Leo III placed a golden crown upon the head of Charlemagne while he knelt before him and the people shouted, "To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, the great and pacific emperor of the Romans, life and victory." Or we recall an even more powerful scene nearly three centuries later, in

1077, when the German emperor Henry IV stood barefoot in the snow and in penitent's garb before the castle gate of Canossa, pleading for mercy from Pope Gregory VII, who two years earlier had deposed him, forbidden anyone to acknowledge his authority, and had even excommunicated him from the saving ordinances of the church. Henry was suing to save his kingdom. These were examples of power politics and power religion at their highest pitch, as both popes and emperors contended for who should have the highest earthly authority.

Gregory VII, better known as Hildebrand, had declared in the bull *Dictatus Papae*, "The Roman Church was founded by God alone; the Roman pope alone can with right be called universal; he alone may use the imperial insignia; his feet only shall be kissed by all princes; he may depose the emperors; he himself may be judged by no one; the Roman Church has never erred, nor will it err in all eternity."

Is that what the Bible means when it talks about God's kingdom—the rule of popes or other church leaders over kings and their kingdoms? Or is God's kingdom something else? It obviously is something else, and church leaders have erred whenever they have tried to make the church a temporal kingdom. The periods of history in which they have done this have become the most oppressive, secular, corrupt, and violent the world has seen.

God's Kingdom and Human Kingdoms

Paul has been writing about the demands of Christian love and the obligation each believer has to protect and edify his Christian brother or sister. But now, suddenly in the midst of all this, there comes a definition of the kingdom of God that is almost a thunderbolt in view of some
Christians' forceful and repeated attempts to impose their earthly wills on other people: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (v. 17).

Romans 14:17 is a key verse for any biblical study of the true nature of the church, yet this is the only time in Romans that Paul employs the

word *kingdom,* and he uses it only sixteen times in all his writings. It is, however, a common and important term in the gospels. There are fifty-five occurrences of *kingdom* in Matthew, twenty in Mark, forty-six in Luke, and five in John.

God's kingdom is difficult to define because it is so important and so extensive. Sometimes the word is used of the universal reign of God over his creation. At other times it is used of the Messianic reign of Jesus Christ, as God promised David: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). Later, when the house of David was in evident decline, the prophet Isaiah made clear that this promise was to be fulfilled in the divine Messiah who was to come: "He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (Isa. 9:6-7). In still other passages, as in Romans 14, the word refers to the church.

Perhaps the most important thing to be said about the kingdom of God is that it is *God's* kingdom. It is *the realm in which God rules.* Moreover, because it is a case of *God* ruling, his kingdom must by definition be over and above any of the kingdoms of men and be infinitely superior to them. The kingdoms of men may endure for a time, but they eventually pass away. The kingdom of God is forever.

The normal course of the kingdoms of this world is described in a striking way in the Book of Daniel. After the early chapters in which the divine humbling of Nebuchadnezzar is recounted, his son Belshazzar comes to the throne. We are told that Belshazzar gave a party, during the course of which he defiled the vessels that had been used for God's worship in the temple in Jerusalem but had been brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar after he had conquered the Jews' capital city. While Belshazzar was doing this, the fingers of a hand appeared

and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the banqueting room: *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN*.

The king and his nobles were frightened, and when none of the king's wise men could decipher the words, they sent for Daniel, who explained what the writing meant. "*Mene*: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. *Tekel*: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. *Peres*: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 5:26-28).

Daniel said this:

O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.

But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.... You did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

Daniel 5:18-

2

3 That very night the Medes and Persians overran the palace, Belshazzar was killed, and Darius reigned in his stead.

That is the course of every human kingdom. God allows an individual or group to rise above their peers in power, their victories bring pride, and God removes them and allows others to reign in their place. Arnold

Toynbee, the great British historian, wrote that the world has known thirty-four major civilizations, but all have endured only for a time. Egypt was once mighty, but it fell. Greece and Rome have fallen. The Soviet Union has collapsed. In time the United States of America will also succumb to this inevitable law of history: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Prov. 14:34). Pride and sin will also bring America down.

God's Kingdom and the Church

But what of the church? Is it to be an earthly kingdom? If it is, what should its relationship to the civil authorities be? If not, of what does it actually consist?

A great many errors about the church and its proper relationship to the secular powers could have been avoided if Bible students had begun with the definition I have just given and then carried it over to the church consistently. The kingdom of God is *the realm in which God rules.* That is why there is a sense in which the whole world is God's kingdom; he is sovereign over his entire creation. At the same time, the rule of God describes his relationship to those who acknowledge his rule—that is, to those into whom he has entered by his Holy Spirit. This means that the kingdom of God is present in this important spiritual sense whenever individuals come to acknowledge God's rule and reflect his character.

How is that expressed? That is the question Paul answers in the verse we are studying. For when he writes, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," Paul is saying that the kingdom of God is present and is seen in whatever God does in the lives of Christians. And what God does is bestow righteousness, grant peace, and bring joy in the Holy Spirit. This has nothing to do with what we eat or drink (or what we do not eat or drink) or whether, to use Paul's first example, believers observe certain days. God is not concerned about these things, which is why we are not to be concerned about them, except to the extent that our conduct may hurt others. What we must be concerned about are the

three items Paul mentions: "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

God's Kingdom and the Christian

Unfortunately, commentators are divided about the way these three terms are to be understood, since they are used in various ways in the Bible. One approach is to see these words as expressions of God's progressive saving work in the Christian: first, God gives the righteousness of Christ to the believer; second, this imparted righteousness becomes the basis for a new peace between God and the sinner, spilling over into a peacemaking approach to other persons; third, a life of divine joy results. The other approach is to see these as moral qualities to be developed within the Christian: righteousness or just dealings toward others, peacemaking toward others, and a joyful disposition toward others.

A number of important commentators hold to the latter view, that these are moral qualities developed in the Christian. John Murray makes three good arguments for it: "(1) 'Joy in the Holy Spirit' is subjective; it is joy in the believer's heart. Since this joy is coordinated with righteousness and peace we would expect the two latter to be in the same category. (2) Verse 18 points back to verse 17. 'Herein' ['in this way,' NIV] refers to the elements specified in verse 17. In these elements the believer is said to serve Christ, be well-pleasing to God, and approved of men. The service of Christ is, without question, an obligation devolving upon us and the discharge is said to make us well-pleasing to God. These ideas do not accord with forensic righteousness and peace. (3) Likewise in verse 19 we have hortatory terms directed to our responsibility. Of particular relevance are the words, 'follow after things which make for peace.'... For these reasons 'righteousness' and 'peace' should be taken as the rectitude and harmony that must govern the attitude and behavior of the believer within the fellowship of the church."

In my opinion, however, this is not a place where arguing from the drift of Paul's argument is terribly persuasive. Normally it would be, but in verse 17 Paul is simply injecting another reason why Christians are not

to be bound by man-made rules and regulations. He is emphasizing that the kingdom of God does not consist of such things but is actually righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, it is most natural to view righteousness in the same way Paul has been developing this term throughout the letter, as the righteousness of Christ imparted to us. With the whole letter behind him, why would he change his usage now?

Charles Hodge clearly thought as I do when he expressed the alternative view like this:

Paul does not mean to say that Christianity consists in morality; that the man who is just, peaceful and cheerful is a true Christian. This would be to contradict the whole argument of this epistle. The righteousness, peace and joy intended are those of which the Holy Spirit is the author. Righteousness is that which enables us to stand before God, because it satisfies the demands of the law. It is the righteousness of faith, both objective and subjective; peace is the concord between God and the soul, between reason and conscience, between the heart and our fellowmen. And the joy is the joy of salvation; that joy which only those who are in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost ever can experience.

It might be added that if this is the case, if the righteousness in view is the righteousness of
Christ imparted to us; peace, the peace we have with God the Father; and joy, the joy of the Holy Spirit, which is a fruit of his work within us, then Paul's definition of God's kingdom is trinitarian. The gift of righteousness pertains to God the Son, peace to God the Father, and joy to God the Holy Spirit—a very satisfactory form of definition.

1. *The righteousness of Jesus Christ.* Righteousness is one of the most important words in Romans. It is used thirty-five times in this one letter alone, and it more than any other single word is used by Paul to sum up the salvation that comes to us through the work of Jesus Christ. Since the kingdom of God means among other things the reign of God in us

through the work of Christ, it is nearly impossible to think of the kingdom of God in us without reference to this imparted righteousness.

In volume one of these studies I made three important points about this New Testament concept:

First, this righteousness from God is the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have no righteousness of ourselves. "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). If we are to have any righteousness at all—which we must if we are to stand before the holy presence of Almighty God—we must receive it from Christ.

Second, God offers this righteousness of Jesus Christ freely, apart from any need to work for it on our part. This is critical, since the mere existence of righteousness would do us no good unless God were willing to give it to us freely; we could never deserve or earn it. It was a discovery of this great truth that transformed Martin Luther and launched the Reformation. Before he discovered that God offered the righteousness of Christ as a free gift, Luther hated God for demanding what he could never produce. But after he discovered God's grace in the gospel, Luther became a champion of grace and was willing to perish for that truth.

Third, faith is the channel by which sinners receive Christ's righteousness. Initially Luther thought of faith as a work, but he came to see it merely as a hand opening to receive what God offers. We can say then that the kingdom of God comes to those who by God's grace open their hearts to receive Christ's righteousness and God's rule.

Augustus M. Toplady expressed this movingly when he wrote this hymn:

> Nothing in my hand I bring.
> Simply to thy cross I cling;
> Naked, come to thee for dress;
> Helpless, look to thee for grace;
> Foul, I to the fountain fly;

Wash me, Savior, or I die.
Rock of Ages, cleft for me.
Let me hide myself in thee.

2. *The peace of God the Father.* The second of Paul's three terms is *peace,* and this certainly means, at least in the first instance, the peace with God that we have as a result of Jesus Christ's work for us and God's justification of us because of that work.

The Bible speaks of two kinds of peace: "peace *with* God" because of Christ's work and the "peace *of* God," which he imparts as we lay our concerns before him. Paul mentions the first type in Romans 5:1: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." He refers to the second peace in Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

3. *The joy of the Holy Spirit.* And last of all is joy, though it is the first of the marks of the church as Jesus developed them in his great prayer for the church recorded in John 17 (see v. 13). Indeed, it is even first here in the sense that it is the first evidence of the work that has been done for us and in us by God. When we have been justified by God as a result of receiving Christ's righteousness and have been brought into a relationship with God that may be described as peace after warfare, the natural expression of that in us is the superabounding joy of the Holy Spirit.

Have you experienced that joy? One of the sad things about so many Christians is that they do not seem to be cheerful. One Sunday afternoon in Scotland a church janitor picked up a piece of paper on which one of the worshipers had been doodling, probably during a particularly long sermon. It contained this bit of wry doggerel:

To dwell above with saints in love,
Aye, that will be glory!
To dwell below with saints I know,

Now that's a different story.

It shouldn't be different, of course. It is true that nothing here will ever equal our joy in heaven—that joy will be full, matchless, and unalloyed. But something of that joy, something of the joy of our salvation, should be observable now in all who are truly believing members of God's kingdom.

First Righteousness and Peace

But we must get the order right! There are many people who would love to have the joy that trusting Christians have. In fact, they envy them that joy. But they are unwilling to have it on God's terms, which is the only way it can be had, and that is through faith in the perfect and completed work of Christ. First righteousness, followed by peace with God. Then joy!

Remember what the angel said to the shepherds when the heavenly legions appeared in the night sky over Bethlehem to announce Jesus' birth: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10). It is because we have a Savior, who is also our king, that we have peace with God and joy that is full of glory.

Chapter 216.
Approved by God and Man

Romans 14:17-18

At the end of Luke 2, the chapter that contains Luke's account of the birth of Jesus Christ, there is a fascinating verse that is particularly meaningful if we consider it together with our text in Romans. Luke is writing of Jesus, who, he says, "grew in wisdom and stature, and *in favor with God and men*" (v. 52). In Romans, Paul writes that the Christian "who serves Christ in this way is *pleasing to God and approved by men.*" The correspondence between these two verses

suggests that Christians serve Christ by becoming like Jesus Christ and that if they do this they will receive both divine and human approval.

Serving Jesus "In This Way"

The key terms in Romans 14:18 are the Greek words *en touto* (possibly *en toutois*), which the New International Version translates as *in this way,* the Revised Standard Version as *thus,* and the J. B. Phillips paraphrase as *in these things.*

The proper translation has been a matter of some controversy because of uncertainty about the Greek text. In most of the ancient manuscripts the Greek words are singular: "in this." But in some they are plural: "in these things." If the latter is right, Paul would be referring to the three items mentioned in the previous verse (righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit), and this would dispose us to think of them as virtues rightly to be seen in every Christian: righteous dealings with other people, peacemaking among other people, and a cheerful disposition.

If the majority of the manuscripts are right—that is, if the words are singular ("in this")—then Paul would be referring to the nonjudgmental attitude he has been commending since the beginning of the chapter. That is, he would be promoting a right way of Christian thinking and behaving—knowing that the kingdom of God does not consist in eating and drinking or other nonessential matters but is rather something else entirely: the righteousness of Christ imputed to the sinner, which the believer will want to make known to other people; peace with God achieved by the work of Christ on his or her behalf; and joy, which is a mark of the Holy Spirit of God in the regenerated person's life. In other words, the person who serves Christ will do it by living out a truly vital faith and not by trying to sustain a false, judgmental, and barren legalism.

Paul is not introducing a new subject. He is pointing out that God is looking for a living, vital faith, not legalism. Legalism contributes to the pride of the flesh, because whenever we measure up to some moral code of our own or some other person's devising we think of ourselves

as being better than people who do not measure up to it. Jesus is not served in that way or with that kind of thinking. He is served when we understand that we are accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ alone and are therefore able joyfully to accept and love all others for whom Jesus died. These other believers may be wrong in many respects, in our opinion. But we will know that we are all nevertheless part of one spiritual body, the body of Christ, and that we belong together with all other Christians as together we seek to live for Christ and bear a strong witness for him in this world.

Paul's Personal Example

When we read this passage in light of what we know about Paul and his background in Pharisaic Judaism, it is impossible not to sense that he is writing out of his own experience and with a strong sense of gratitude for the liberty he had himself found in Jesus Christ.

We remember that Paul had been a Pharisee and that the Pharisees were the strictest religious sect of the Jews. There were never very many Pharisees, but they were highly regarded because they made it their life endeavor and passion to keep the law of God in its entirety. If the law said, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" and "on it you shall not do any work," they asked, What is work? Then they devised a detailed list of what was and was not forbidden labor. A godly person could not cook on the Sabbath; that was work. So the food to be eaten had to be cooked the day before. Carrying something was work. Even something like a handkerchief could not be carried from one room to another; that would mean breaking the law. If the handkerchief were worn around the neck as a piece of clothing, however, it fell into a different category and was allowed.

There were thousands of regulating definitions like this, and not only for the Sabbath observance but for every other Old Testament precept as well. Food laws were strictly observed. Kosher cooking was demanded. Tithes were obligatory. The Pharisees tithed their possessions as well as their money, which Jesus acknowledged even when he was chiding them for their hypocrisy: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and

Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law— justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matt. 23:23).

That was exactly the problem. In the days before his conversion Paul had been meticulous in keeping these man-made regulations, but he had neglected the more important matters. In fact, he had not even begun to appreciate their importance. For that is what legalism does. It bogs us down in trivia while making us dull, impervious, and then blind to things that are essential. Paul thought he was righteous, but he had not even begun to understand the scope of God's righteousness. He did not know that pleasing God by human righteousness was beyond his ability. He knew the word *grace,* but he did not understand the nature of God's great and abundant grace or that he needed that grace. Most important, he did not recognize that his attempts to attain to his own righteousness had actually been keeping him from salvation through Christ by the grace of God.

One day that changed. Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, whom he believed were enemies of the true faith given to his people. Instead he was arrested by Jesus. A bright light flashed from heaven, and when Paul saw it he fell to the ground blinded. He heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4).

Paul knew this was a theophany, a revelation or appearance of God. So he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" (v. 5).

He was shocked when the divine voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (vv. 5-6).

Paul was forever changed by this revelation. He became an entirely different man, and he thought differently too. In Philippians he tells us what this encounter meant to him, comparing what he found in Christ with what he had been trying to achieve for himself before that time:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:4-11

Paul is saying that before he met Jesus in that vision he thought that he had pleased God by his inherited religious advantages coupled to his own numerous achievements:

Circumcised on the eighth day. That was a claim to having been born into a true Jewish family rather than being a proselyte, who would be circumcised as an adult, or an Ishmaelite, who would be circumcised when he was thirteen years old.

An Israelite. Israel was the covenant name of God's elect people. So this word brings in Paul's inherited claim to all the covenant privileges and blessings.

The tribe of Benjamin. When the civil war that came after the death of Solomon divided the northern kingdom from the southern kingdom, Benjamin was the one tribe that remained with Judah in the south, therefore remaining close to the proscribed place of worship, which was Jerusalem. Both kingdoms fell away from God. But the decline was about one hundred years slower in the south, and Benjamin benefited from the geographical association.

A Hebrew of Hebrews. This is a way of saying that Paul was a pure-blooded Jew, born of a
Jewish father as well as a Jewish mother. Being a Jew brought great spiritual advantages, which Paul has already listed in Romans 9:4-5: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!"

But Paul was not only counting on the spiritual advantages he had inherited, he was counting on the things he had achieved for himself, too. He was also a *Pharisee,* as we have seen. He was a *zealous* Pharisee, which he proved by his persecution of the infant church. Finally, he was at least in his own eyes *faultless* in regard to *legalistic righteousness.* Like a good Pharisee he had done what he believed he should do.

Yet once he saw Jesus and learned how empty all these human achievements were and how far short he had fallen of the inner righteousness that the holy God requires, he counted all of that as "loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ." That is, he reckoned his former assets as liabilities. He moved them over to the liabilities column. Under assets he wrote "Jesus
Christ alone."

When we read Paul's testimony we can understand in a moment why a man like Paul was never going to go back to legalism and why he was so eager to urge an entirely different approach on other Christians. He didn't want any more of that; it hadn't worked. We can understand why he says categorically and without any qualification, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Pleasing to God

When Paul was in Judaism he must have believed that what he was doing pleased God, or at least he must have hoped that God was

pleased. But after he was converted he knew that it was actually this new liberated life, lived by the grace of God in Christ, that pleased him.

The aim of every believer must be to please God, and our example in doing so must be the Lord Jesus Christ. On the occasion of Jesus' public baptism by John, recorded in three of the gospels, a voice came from heaven declaring, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17; cf. Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Toward the end of his ministry, on the occasion of his transfiguration, the voice from heaven came again, saying to Peter, James, and John, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Matt. 17:5).

Jesus pleased his Father perfectly. So if you are striving to be like Jesus, you will please God too. Paul had this mind when he wrote of his own aspirations, saying, "We make it our goal to please him" (2 Cor. 5:9).

Is that your goal? If it is, you will stop judging other Christians and instead live in a way that manifests the grace of God in your own life. Above all, you will remember that you are only a sinner and that you have been saved solely by God's grace. People who understand that know they are not better than other people, even if they have come to understand the Bible better than others and obey it more completely. The truth is that such people are not comparing themselves with other people at all. Their minds are on Jesus. They know only that they belong to Jesus and love him, and that they want other people to know and love him too.

Approved by Men

The final phrase of our text is startling, for it tells us that the one who serves Jesus Christ in this way will not only be pleasing to God but will also be "approved by men." What is startling about that statement is that we often are not at all pleasing to non-Christians. We are scorned and even hated by them.

The Bible seems to be contradictory here. On the one hand, Jesus told his disciples, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). He also said this:

> *Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you*
> *and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man....*
> *Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.*
>
> Luke 6:22, 26

On the other hand, Paul listed human approval as a qualification of one who wanted to be an officer in the church: "He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (1 Tim. 3:7). As far as the example of Jesus himself is concerned, although he "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52), he also was despised by many (Isa. 53:3).

Perhaps this illustration will help explain this paradox. Years ago one of my predecessors at Tenth Presbyterian Church, Donald Grey Barnhouse, was teaching about Christians being in the world but not a part of the world, and he concluded by saying, "You may be sure that if nobody thinks you are strange and out of step, you are not a good Christian." After the meeting a friend who had been present and had heard that remark added wisely, "However, you should also say that if *everybody* thinks you are strange and out of step, you are not a good Christian."

Clearly we are not out to please the world, and we will not please it. If the world hated our Lord and Master enough to crucify him, we can be sure that it will hate us too. At the same time, there should be within the true follower of Jesus Christ enough of his character, truth, love, and integrity that some looking on will, reluctantly perhaps but nevertheless genuinely, acknowledge that the believer is indeed living an exemplary and truly pious life. They should be able to acknowledge that Christians are real. The world must not be able to wag its finger at us and call us hypocrites.

A brief study of the word *approved* (*dokimos* in Greek) will also help us understand what is required of one who is serious about serving Jesus Christ. In the ancient world there was no paper money as we know it today, and until a rudimentary banking system grew up for the sake of international trade during the Middle Ages, all financial transactions were in gold, silver, or base metal coin. There were no great coin presses, so in order to make coins the metal was heated until liquid, then poured into molds where it was allowed to cool. After cooling, the irregular edges of the rough coins were trimmed away. This was an inexact method, of course. Moreover, the metal was soft because it was not mixed with alloys, and people frequently shaved away at the edges and kept the metal, in time collecting enough to make up the equivalent of a new coin. We know this was a problem because many laws were passed against it. In one century alone, the city of Athens passed over eighty laws intended to stop this practice.

What happened, of course, was that in time some coins would become so whittled down that the merchants would reject them as obviously lacking their full weight or value. At this point the coins were said to be *adokimos*—"disapproved." On the other hand, merchants who were upright and would therefore neither give nor accept "light" money, were said to be *dokimos*—honest men. And their coins were *dokimos* too.

That is the sense in which the word *approved* is used of the followers of Jesus Christ. They are to be approved by the world in the sense that the world is to recognize that they have their full weight, that they are people of genuine spiritual substance. Moreover, when we remember that one meaning of the Hebrew word *kabod* (usually translated *glory* in the Bible) is weight or weightiness, we see that in this sense Christians are to be those who show forth something of the glory of Jesus Christ and are recognized by the world as doing so. We might say that the world is to recognize that believers in Christ are the genuine article and that they show forth something that is better than anything the world knows and that goes beyond its experience.

It is tragic that it should ever be any other way. Somewhere in his writings, John R. W. Stott, the wise Church of England rector, tells

about two Englishmen who were riding in a railway carriage. In the next carriage was a man whom one of the first two thought looked like the presiding Archbishop of Canterbury. "No, he's not," said the friend.

"Yes, he is," said the first.

Eventually they decided to make a bet on whether the third gentleman was the archbishop or not. They agreed on their terms. Then the traveler who thought the man was the well-known leader of the Church of England crossed over to the other compartment and asked him if he were by any chance the Archbishop of Canterbury. The man replied with a curse, swearing that blanketyblank he was not the blankety-blank Archbishop of Canterbury. The questioner went back to his compartment and told his companion, "The bet's off. There's no way to tell whether he's the archbishop or not."

Getting Our Priorities Right

Our text tells us that if we are determined to serve Jesus Christ by living for him and not by legalism, then we will be "pleasing to God and approved by men." But notice that if we do please men (which is not always the case but should frequently be), we will not please them by setting out to please them, but rather by setting out to serve Christ. That is, we must put things in the right order and get our priorities straight. If you try to please men, you will never please them all the time, though you may please some occasionally. But what is really important, you will never please God. God cannot be put in second place. On the other hand, if you determine to please God, you will certainly please him and you may even get a begrudging approval by some fairly reasonable human beings too.

The Book of Revelation says, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests *to serve his God and Father*—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen" (Rev. 1:5-6). So let's be sure that we really do serve God.

Chapter 217.

Building Up or Tearing Down

Romans 14:19-15:2

Most of us get impatient with repetition. In fact, if the repetition is also admonition, we get hostile: "Why are you telling me that again? I heard you the first time. I'll get to it when I am good and ready." Children get impatient when their parents remind them to eat their cereal, make their beds, clean up their rooms, or wash their faces. The attitude doesn't stop with childhood either. As adults we get impatient with repetitions from God and find them offensive.

The fact that something is repeated shows that we need to hear it. I say this here because nearly everything in the verses that end Romans 14 and begin Romans 15 has been said before. Paul is still talking about our tendencies to judge other Christians, fighting over things that are not important, and he tells us not to do this, encouraging the strong to bear with the convictions of the weak. In fact, the very same words occur in these two sections: *peace* (verses 17 and 19), *destroy* (verses 15 and 20), *clean* and *unclean* (verses 14 and 20), *stumble* (verses 13 and 20), *fall* (verses 4 and 21), *condemned* (verses 3 and 23), and *weak* and *strong* (verses 1 and 15:1).

I often say that if God tells us something once, we should pay attention. It is God speaking. But when he says something twice or even three times, surely we should stop anything else we are doing, focus our minds, seize upon each individual word, memorize what is being said, ponder its meaning, and seek to apply it to every aspect of our lives.

The Building That Is Christ's Church

Nevertheless, the passage we come to now is not entirely repetitious. The main points are, but the section as a whole is bracketed with a concept that has not yet appeared in Romans—to *edify* or *build up.* This word pictures Christians as a building (or part of a building) that needs to be carefully constructed, and it contrasts this work with actions or attitudes that would tend to tear the building down. The word occurs in

verse 19: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual *edification."* Then, although the New International Version translates it as *build up,* it occurs again in Romans 15:2, where we read: "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, *to build him up*."

Edification is mostly a Pauline concept, since fifteen out of eighteen occurrences of the word (*oikodomê*) in the New Testament are in Paul's writings. Yet the roots of the idea probably go back to Jesus' words to Peter at the time of Peter's great confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus had asked his disciples who other people thought he was. They gave the popular answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. "But what about you?" he then asked. "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16).

Then Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will *build* my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (vv. 17-18).

Jesus was speaking of the corporate body of believers, of course. Paul usually employs the word to refer to building up individual Christians, helping individuals grow spiritually. But the words in the Greek text are exactly the same, and Paul also sometimes uses the word *edify* of the church. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ephesians
2:19-22

In these verses Paul likens the church to a kingdom, a family, and a temple. But in thinking of a temple he thinks of a building into which individuals are being "built together." That is, each one is a part of it.

Take Care How You Build

This image is so well developed in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's writings, that it is useful to think about it carefully. If God is in the process of building his church, as Jesus said he is, and if Christians each have a share in doing the work, we ought to ask ourselves how the work should be done and what this should mean for us personally. We need to keep several things in mind.

1. *To build something properly you need to know what you are trying to build.* You need a design or blueprint. We do not have to go very far to find this idea in Romans 14, because immediately after his first use of the word *edification* (in v. 19) Paul speaks of the project as "the work of God," saying, "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food" (v. 20).

This is not a complete blueprint, but it gets us started by reminding us that the church is God's church, not ours, and that what matters is what God is doing in the lives of individual Christians, not whether those people conform to our ideas of what a pious or useful Christian should be. In Paul's day some people thought that it was important that other Christians observe certain rules of eating and drinking or keep certain holy days. But Paul has been saying forcefully that this is not what the kingdom of God is all about. He has just stated that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (v. 17).

For a fuller blueprint, we go again to Ephesians. In one of its best-known passages Paul refers to God's plan like this: "[God] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the

faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13).

"The whole measure of the fullness of Christ" is what we should be trying to see in other
Christians. Therefore, to the extent that we are following God's blueprint rather than our dim vision of what we think other people should be, we will be doing everything in our power to help them become like Jesus Christ and be equipped to serve others for his sake.

2. *You need the right foundation.* The second requirement for putting up a good building is a solid foundation. In fact, at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus used this image to distinguish between those who would build well by hearing his words and putting them into practice and those who would not:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Matthew 7:24-27 To the Corinthians Paul writes of the foundation as Jesus Christ himself: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11).

Jesus meant precisely the same thing when he told Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18).

Because of the way he said this some people have supposed that he was saying he was going to build his church on Peter. But Jesus was actually making a play on Peter's name to highlight the contrast between his weak disciple and himself. In Greek Peter's name is *Petros*, the masculine form of the noun meaning stone. (It can also mean pebble.)

That is what Peter was, a little stone. But when Jesus spoke of the "rock" on which he would build his church, he used the feminine form of the same word (*petra*), which means living rock or bedrock. Peter was a little pebble that could easily be dislodged, as he was soon to demonstrate by his failure at the time of Christ's trial. But Jesus was the solid and living Rock of Ages.

This was how Peter himself understood Jesus' words, because he wrote of Jesus as "the living Stone" in his first letter, drawing on three Old Testament texts to make his point:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

> *"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone,*
> *and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."*

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

> *"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." and,*
> *"A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."*
>
> *1 Peter 2:4-8*

Today many people are trying to build useful, solid lives. But they need to know that the only adequate foundation for any stable life or career is Jesus Christ. Are you building on that foundation, a foundation that will enable you to stand against the many storms of life—or are you building on sand?

3. *You need good supplies.* A third necessity if you are going to construct a worthwhile building is enough raw material—and it has to be of good quality. Jesus said, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see

> if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish'" (Luke 14:28-30).

How are you going to build up another Christian, or your own life, for that matter? By teaching the truths of God's Word. And the Word of God will never run short or prove to be inadequate.

That is why Paul told Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:14-17

We can also think of the wonderfully moving scene in Acts 20 where Paul is taking leave of the
Ephesian elders. He knows that he is not going to see them again, so he says, "I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). Paul would never instruct these dear friends again, but he knew he could trust God to continue the work of sanctification in their lives by the power of his written Word.

4. *You need to construct your building bit by bit.* No worthwhile building is constructed overnight. Plans must be drawn, foundations laid, materials chosen, details lovingly applied. In fact, the more substantial and important the building is, the longer the construction will take. Isaiah recognized this when he compared the work of building character to raising children:

   Who is it he is trying to teach?

To whom is he explaining his message?
To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?
For it is:
Do and do, do and do, Rule on rule, rule on rule; A little here, a little there.

Isaiah 28:9-10

No one can raise a child overnight, just as one cannot construct a building overnight. Similarly, we cannot edify other Christians rapidly. It takes hard work over time. It means adding a little teaching here and a little teaching there. In terms of a church's ministry, it requires strong consistent teaching week by week.

The Opposite of Building: Tearing Down

There is a negative side to all of this, too. It is also possible to tear down. In fact, this is often done. It is one of the sad things about some forms of Christianity.

One way we tear others down rather than building them up is by fighting over things that are not important: "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food" (Rom. 14:20). Another is by insisting on our own rights and pleasures rather than thinking about others: "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (Rom. 15:2).

Many years ago a missionary executive visited Donald Grey Barnhouse. They talked about problems on the mission field, particularly things that cause divisions, and Barnhouse asked the man to write down things that harm the work of God in other people. The executive spent several hours producing this carefully documented list:

An unforgiving spirit. Self-seeking. A legalistic spirit. Playing God for others. Hypocrisy.
Failing to appreciate others' gifts. Failing to make allowances for one another (Eph. 4:2; James 2:12-13). Lack of patience. Not sympathizing with others' infirmities or, perhaps, their lack of gifts that we possess.

Evil speaking (James 4:11; Titus 3:2). Assuming, without grounds, that others are at fault (James 5:9). Pulling one another to pieces (James 4:11-12, Phillips). Suspecting the motives of another. A domineering spirit. A rebellious spirit. Snobbery (James 2:1, Phillips). Hatred. Grumbling, arguing, murmuring. Maliciousness. Being a busybody. Greediness. Bitterness. Resentment. A sense of inferiority (i.e., not resting in the Lord, not satisfied with the gifts he has given). Lack of security. Instability. Timidity. Spite. Laziness. Economic sponging. Lying and slander. Malice. Jealousy. Thinking too highly of oneself. A critical spirit toward others. Carrying on controversy. Being ill-informed about the position of another.

All of those attitudes and actions are destructive. They tear down rather than build up. But the missionary executive also prepared a positive list:

Willingness to be in subjection one to another. Considering others better than oneself. An understanding spirit. A sense of intimate relationship to Christ. Not insisting on our rights. Willingness to confess a wrong spirit. Sincerity. A generous spirit. A sympathetic spirit. Trusting others. Having faith in Christ, not necessarily in others, but expressed as trust to others, knowing that we belong to him. Joyfulness. Prayer. Discretion. A critical spirit toward oneself. A gentle and quiet spirit (2 Tim. 2:25). Humility (1 Peter 5:5). Using our gifts for one another. Remembering our own mistakes (James 3:2). Christ-centeredness. Love in word and deed. Fair dealing. Integrity. Recognizing one's place. A forgiving spirit. Doing things decently and in order. Conscientiousness. Faithfulness. Being responsible to perform the tasks assigned to us. Not misusing our authority over others. Being willing to follow those in authority over us.

A Temple Rising to God

Is all this worth it? Is it worthwhile sharpening our skills and developing our Christian character so that others might grow to be like Jesus Christ? Of course, it is. The problem is not that we doubt the ultimate value of the work we are given to do but that we get bogged down in the hard, daily task of fashioning the stones of this building and

fitting them to the overall structure. We get our eyes off the blueprint and get bogged down in the rubble.

It helps to remember that what God is building is a temple. Here is an illustration. We are told in 1 Kings 6:7 that when the great temple of Solomon was constructed "only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site while it was being built." To my knowledge, no other building in history was ever built in this way. Its construction was so well done it was almost silent. Silently, silently the stones were added, and the building rose.

So it is with the church. We do not hear what is going on inside human hearts as the Holy Spirit creates new life and adds individuals to the temple he is building. We do not even fully realize the part we are playing as we seek to build these other people up by focusing on the important matters, laying aside petty differences, and teaching the Word of God to each of them faithfully. But God is working, and the temple is rising. In the days of the apostles God was adding Gentiles to his church. Paul was his chief instrument in carrying the gospel to them. God added the high and low, slaves and freemen, Greeks, Romans, and barbarians. He added many at the time of the Reformation and in the days of the Great Awakenings and revivals.

He is still building his church today, and we are his workmen, laborers together with Jesus Christ. We have a responsibility to do the work well.

Chapter 218.
The Example of Our Lord: Part 1

Romans 15:3-4

For many years it has been common in the evangelical church to play down the importance of Jesus Christ as an example. This is primarily a reaction to the liberal church's focus on Jesus as an example to the

neglect of his deity and atoning work on the cross. Evangelicals have responded by saying, "It is not an example we need; it is a Savior." That is correct, but it is also true that the Bible presents Jesus as an example for those who have been saved by him, telling us that we must be increasingly like Jesus, whom we profess to love and serve. Our text in Romans is one instance of the way the Bible frequently refers to Jesus Christ as our example.

In fact, the chapter we are studying points to his example more than once. In Romans 15:3-4, Paul refers to Jesus as one who did not please himself but rather sought to please the Father and others. In verses 7-9 he denotes him as one who accepted others.

Selfish or Selfless

In this study I intend to follow a line of thought developed by one of my predecessors at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Donald Grey Barnhouse. His study appeared as part of his extensive radio broadcasts on Romans and was later published in booklet form. Today it can be found in *God's Glory,* volume 10 of the first edition of the Romans series.

Barnhouse began by contrasting the selfishness of human nature with the selflessness of Jesus Christ, noting that the Greek word for the first person is *ego,* translated as *self.* Therefore, to be selfish is to be egotistical. By contrast, our text says that the Lord Jesus Christ did not please himself. In this he is marked with a true, perfect humanity very different from the fallen humanity of the sons of Adam:

We live in a selfish world, and selfishness is the principle mark of the human race. Stand beside the highway and watch the death toll of automobile accidents rise. What is the cause of most accidents? The attitude of "Get-out-of-my-way!" How many times we see the baleful glare of a driver who comes up beside us in traffic, his whole expression showing his compulsion to be first.

Even when a person becomes a believer in Christ the old Adamic nature remains, and there is warfare between the spirit and the flesh. In the

church at Philippi, two people were at odds and Paul thought it necessary to send one of the apostolic company to settle the matter. He explained that he was sending Timothy, perhaps the youngest of the group, because Timothy would put the interests of the Philippians ahead of his own; and Paul added, "For all look after their own interests, and not those of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 2:21, KJV). The purpose of our text in Romans is to teach us to be like... Christ, who gave us the example for our daily living.

One need not be a close observer to see that the thoughts of the world are centered in self. We switch on the radio, and the song comes lilting forth:

> Oh! what a beautiful morning!
> Oh! what a beautiful day!
> I've got a beautiful feeling,
> Everything's going *my way.*

We turn the dial and hear a sermon on unselfishness and the glory of becoming like Christ and serving others; but the next program tells you how to get out of helping others.

Here Barnhouse quoted one of the songs from the well-known Broadway musical *My Fair Lady,* based on the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw:

> The Lord above made man to help his neighbor, No matter where, on land or sea of foam.
> The Lord above made man to help his neighbor, but
> With a little bit of luck,
> With a little bit of luck,
> When he comes around you won't be home.

Barnhouse remarks that when we turn back to the Word of God and consider the example of Jesus Christ, we learn that for Christians, when

your neighbor comes around for help, with a little bit of grace you *will* be home.

He Did Not Please Himself

The chief thing our text tells us is that Jesus did not please himself but rather set out to please God for the benefit of others, and it concludes from that truth that we should follow Christ's example. Indeed, the verses teach what Paul repeated in Philippians 2:5-8:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider
> equality with God something to be grasped,
> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a
> servant, being made in human likeness.
> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled
> himself and became obedient to death— even death on a
> cross!

What would happen to us if Jesus had pleased himself instead of coming to earth as a man and dying for our sins? Where would we be today if Christ had put his own interests first? Once Jesus asked this question of his disciples. As recounted in John 6, the Lord had explained the doctrine of election, pointing out that he alone is the true bread from heaven to whom all must come for life and that no man can come to him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). Later in the chapter we are told that many of his disciples objected, saying, "This is a hard teaching; who can accept it?" (v. 60). Jesus, knowing that his disciples were confused, said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!" (vv. 61-62). In other words, "What would happen if I pleased myself and went back to heaven now, instead of dying for your sins?" They would have perished and gone to hell, of course. But he did not do that. Earlier he had told them, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me" (v. 38), and he was doing it.

Psalm 69

It is characteristic of Paul to nail down an argument with a passage from the Old Testament after he has made his points well. He does that extensively as he comes to the end of the section of chapter 15 we are studying, quoting Psalm 18:49 in verse 9, Deuteronomy 32:43 in verse 10, Psalm 117:1 in verse 11, and Isaiah 11:10 in verse 12. But he begins this even earlier, in the verses we are studying now, citing Psalm 69:9 to prove that Jesus did not please himself but rather sought to please God his Father for the benefit of others. Romans 15:3 says, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Psalm 69 is one of the great messianic psalms of the Old Testament. Seven of its thirty-six verses are directly quoted in the New Testament, and others furnish themes relating to Christ's work

that are expanded in the gospels. In the work I referred to earlier Barnhouse noted that if we read this Psalm with Jesus in mind, we will see that he was denied and slandered by his enemies (v. 4), estranged from his own brothers (v. 8), made a proverb by the people (v. 11), criticized by the rulers (v. 12), and was the theme of obscene songs by the drunkards (v. 12). Each of these points lends force to the verse from the psalm Paul quotes and provides examples of the kinds of abuse we should be willing to endure for God and others.

1. *His enemies.* "Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me" (v. 4). Since Jesus quoted this verse of himself there can be no doubt how we are to apply it. Among the scribes, Pharisees, priests, and Levites, there were men who simply hated him. It is not hard to know why. Barnhouse explained that they looked like good men only until he came and stood beside them. Then they were exposed in their true colors: "Linen bleaching on the grass seems white until the snow falls; it then appears gray. Thus it was for the so-called 'spiritual' leaders of the people. They hated him freely; they hated him without a cause in himself."

2. *His brothers.* Psalm 69 also indicates that opposition to Jesus surfaced in his own home. After Jesus was born, Mary bore Joseph at least six children, as at least two daughters and four sons are mentioned in Mark 6:3. Psalm 69:8 says, "I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons." Apparently the presence of Jesus in that household caused problems. And no wonder! It is hard to live with a highly talented person. How much more difficult must it have been to live with absolute perfection, which is what Jesus was. His brothers knew that Jesus was exceptional. They knew he had turned water into wine and that he had healed the sick and fed the multitudes, but they saw this only as a potential source of profit for themselves. John tells us, "When the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, 'You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.' For even his own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:2-5). Clearly Jesus had become "a stranger" to his brothers and "an alien" to his own mother's sons.

3. *A proverb.* Still further in Psalm 69 we see that Jesus became a cause for "sport" among the people (v. 11). We know that Christian students can be sneered at on college campuses, called religious nuts, the radical right, or the God squad. We do not know what specific words the unbelieving masses used to make fun of Christ, but the psalm leaves no doubt that he became a joke to the people.

4. *The rulers.* In the next verse we read, "Those who sit at the gate mock me" (v. 12). To sit at the gate was to be an elder and a ruler of the people. Of the model woman described in the last chapter of Proverbs it is said, "Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land" (Prov. 31:23). Thus, those who are referred to in Psalm 69:12 were the rulers of the people, and they were against Jesus.

5. *The drunkards.* Finally, we read that Jesus was "the song of the drunkards" (v. 12). Solomon wrote that "fools mock at... sin"

(Prov. 14:9), but here we find men who are mocking at the Savior. The Lord Jesus Christ was abused in all these ways, yet he pursued his course because he did not seek to please himself, but the Father.

A Lifetime of Insults

When Jesus began to expose the leaders' sin, they retaliated with hostility. He told them that they were children of their fathers, who had stoned prophets and killed those who were sent to them. "You are doing the things your own father does," he said (John 8:41). They turned on him with anger blazing in their eyes and taunted him with the worst reproach that could be offered. They must have known that Jesus had been born shortly after the marriage of Joseph and Mary. They flung in his teeth that he was known to be an illegitimate child. "*We* are not illegitimate children," they boasted. Jesus knew that he had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and took this reproach in stride, but he let them know their background: "You belong to your father, the devil" (v. 44). "It should be realized that any one who joins the Pharisees in denying the Virgin Birth of our Lord Jesus takes company with the children of the devil, to be judged to the utmost by the Father when he ultimately deals with all the insults that were given to him through his Son," wrote Barnhouse.

When Philip first told Nathanael about the Lord Jesus, he said, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Nathanael's answer was a reproach: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (v. 46). The same reproach was brought against Jesus by the rulers. "How can the Christ come from Galilee?" they asked (John 7:41). When Nicodemus interrupted their tirades with the suggestion that ordinary civil rights demanded that Jesus get a proper hearing, they turned on him, saying, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (v. 52). Barnhouse offers this explanation:

The first time that Jesus ever spoke in public, even before the Sermon on the Mount, his message on salvation by the simple grace of God aroused in the Pharisees the utmost of fury. He had not spoken twenty lines before they were filled with wrath, and rose up and led him to the brow of the hill on which the city was built, intending to push him over the precipice (Luke 4:28-29). His reminder that God saved the Gentile widow and her son and healed Naaman the Syrian, both examples of his sovereign grace toward undeserving sinners, drew the greatest wrath from the people. Men do not want grace from God, they want him to acknowledge that what they find in themselves he also counts as good. This he can never do, and they hate him for it, and they hated his Son when he came with the same message.

Jesus had not been very long in his ministry before men said that he had gone crazy. When he called the twelve and the crowds began to follow him, his friends, perhaps with good intentions, tried to lay hold of him because, they said, "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). They reproached him with this. When later he showed just a touch of the blazing wrath that God will one day exercise through him, telling them how wicked they were, they again thought he was crazy and sent for Mary and his brothers to lead him away quietly (Matt. 12:47).

When he drove out evil spirits, restoring those who had been demon-possessed, the leaders accused him of working by the power of the devil. "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons," they said (Matt. 12:24). "One hesitates to contemplate the depths of iniquity in hearts that can look upon the Lord Jesus Christ and attribute his work to Satan," wrote Barnhouse.

When Jesus was on the cross, the people mocked him with his claims:

You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we

will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now, if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Matthew 27:40-44 It was the height of cruelty to mock a man dying in such agony.

The Bible reveals how the Lord Jesus Christ took these reproaches, which he knew were directed at the Father through him. Matthew paraphrases a passage from Isaiah:

> *Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight;*
> *I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.*
> *He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.*
> *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,*
> *till he leads justice to victory.*
> *In his name the nations will put their hope.*
>
> *Matthew 12:18-21 (cf. Isaiah 42:1-4)*

If there was ever an example of one who was willing to bear even the worst of abuses in order to please God the Father, it was Jesus Christ.

Christ's Life through Christ's Power

The point of this is that Jesus is to be an example for us, that we might behave as he did. We have been told by Jesus that if we seek to please God, we will be hated by the world, because we are not of the world: "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:19-20). Nevertheless, although we may bear abuse for his sake—and we certainly will if we are living close to him and are bearing a genuine witness for him and for righteousness—we are to

bear persecutions patiently without trying to retaliate, that we might please God.

This is an enormous privilege and a daunting challenge. If it were not for the power of Jesus Christ within, we would not respond to either, because we would put ourselves first, as the world does, and avoid the insults. To live as Christ, we must be close to Christ. We must grow in his power by a study of his Word and by close fellowship with him.

F. Godet, the Swiss commentator, wrote, "Divine succor is needed to enable us to follow this line of conduct unflinchingly; and this succor the believer finds only in the constant use of the Scriptures, and in the help of God which accompanies it."

But it's important to remember that in these verses Paul is not talking about Christians standing against the insults and abuses of the world, drawing on the character and power of Jesus to do so, though that is something that is also necessary. Nor is he writing about spiritual warfare. He is talking about a far lesser matter, Christians merely getting along with other Christians, the strong bearing with the limited understandings of the weak and the weak bearing with the beliefs of the strong, whom they believe to be in error. He is simply talking about getting along with one another.

To come back to this point must seem almost a waste of Christ's example, or at least an understatement of the case. But that is exactly the point. Our calling is to be like Jesus Christ, who endured the worst men could do to him in order to please his Father and win our salvation. Since that is our high calling, we should be able to overlook the many ways in which other Christians differ from us and get on with the task of building them up and then striving to grow together with them in the Christian life.

Chapter 219.
The Encouragement of the Scriptures

Romans 15:4

A number of years ago a German theologian named Juergen Moltmann wrote a book entitled *The Theology of Hope.* His point, which meant a great deal to Bible scholars at the time, was that eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) should not be an appendix to Christian theology— something tacked on at the end and perhaps even dispensable to Christian thought—but should be the starting point of everything. He said that it is confidence in what God is going to do in the future that must determine how we think and act now.

I am not sure that is entirely right. I would call the cross of Christ, not eschatology, the center, arguing that we must take our ideas even of the future from the cross. But Moltmann was correct in stressing that hope is important for living well now. To have hope is to look at the future optimistically. So to some extent a person must have hope to live. The Latin word for hope is *spes,* from which the French derived the noun *espoir* and the Spanish, *esperanza*. But put the particle *de* in front of those words, and the resulting word is *despair,* literally "without hope." People who despair do not go on. When John Milton wanted to depict the maximum depth to which Satan fell when he was cast out of heaven, he has him say to the other fallen spirits in hell, "Our final hope is flat despair."

How can any sane person have hope in the midst of the desperate world in which we live? The frivolous can, because they do not think about the future at all. Thinking people find the future grim. Winston Churchill, one of the most brilliant and influential people of his age, died despairing. His last words were, "There is no hope."

Our text says that a Christian can have hope and that the way to that sound and steadfast hope is through the Bible.

In *The Wizard of Oz,* Dorothy and her friends—the scarecrow, the tin man, and the cowardly lion—make their way down a yellow brick road to find their future. Our text likewise gives us a road to hope. That road leads first through teaching, second through patient endurance, and

third through encouragement. The text says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

The Teaching of the Scriptures

The first and most important stop along this important road leading to hope is teaching, because it is through the teaching of the Scriptures that the other elements, endurance and
encouragement, come. Christianity is a teaching religion, and our text is the Bible. It is true that those whose minds have been enlightened by the Bible often go on to learn in other areas too. Some of the greatest scholars in the world have been Christians, and many have traced their love of learning to their Christian roots. Moreover, wherever the gospel has gone throughout the world, schools and colleges and other institutions of higher learning have gone with it. Still, Christians maintain that however much a person may come to know in other areas, if he or she does not know what God has revealed about himself and the way of salvation in the Bible, that person is ignorant and remains a great fool.

Paul said of the Gentile Christians at Ephesus, among whom there must have been many learned persons, that before they had been taught about Jesus and had received him as their Savior, they were "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, *without hope* and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). They may have been educated, but they were ignorant of the things that matter most. After they had been taught and came to faith in Christ, however, they had hope of "the riches of [God's] glorious inheritance in the saints," which was future, and "his incomparably great power for us who believe," which was present (Eph. 1:1819).

Our text in Romans is about the teaching of the Scriptures and tells us at least three important things about the Bible:

1. *The Bible is from God.* When Paul says that everything written in the past "was written to teach us," he is not saying that when Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, he did so intending that the church in future ages might be blessed by his writings, or that David wrote the psalms so that we might profit by them. His point is that God caused the human writers of the Bible to write as they did, because what he had in mind was the edification and encouragement of his people through the ages, whether or not the human writers understood this.

This also flows from the context. We remember that Paul has just quoted Psalm 69:9, applying it to Jesus Christ, whom he brought forward as an example for our right conduct. Some may object, "How can you imagine that David was writing about Jesus Christ, who was born so many hundred of years after his own age, or that this has anything to do with us?" Paul is answering, in effect, as F. Godet suggests, "If I thus apply this saying of the psalmist to Christ and ourselves, it is because, in general, all Scripture was written to instruct and strengthen us."

Of course, many other verses say the same thing. Peter wrote, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Similarly, Paul told Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The reason the Scriptures are so valuable is that they are unlike other books written by mere human beings. They are from God; therefore they have the authority and power of God within them. Besides, God has promised to bless them to the ends for which they have been given (Isa. 55:10-11).

2. *Everything in the Bible is for our good and is profitable.* The second important teaching about the Scriptures in Romans 15:4 is

that all Scripture is for our good and is profitable. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful...." In our text he uses the words "everything that was written," but he means the same thing in both passages.

This is not an endorsement of every piece of ancient literature, as if the words "everything that was written in the past" refer to the writings of the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, or Romans. Paul is not writing about secular literature, but about the writings that are "Godbreathed." Other books may instruct and even charm us wonderfully, but only the Bible gives us a sure ground for hope, since only it speaks with full authority and trustworthiness about what God did to save us from sin and give us eternal life.

Paul's statement is, however, an endorsement of all of the Bible. That is, he is informing us that *"all* Scripture... is profitable" and *"everything* that was written in the past was written to teach us."

Some critics of the Bible have found things in it that they do not like and have therefore argued either that the Bible is from men only, not from God, or that it is a mixture of the two—some parts being from God and some from man. The parts that are from God are then regarded as authoritative, but the parts said to be from human beings only are discarded as error-prone and nonauthoritative. This is a convenient way of pretending to submit to the Bible's authority while at the same time avoiding anything in the Bible that is convicting or contrary to the critic's thought. This is not the Bible's teaching. It is not historic Christianity. The Bible teaches that everything in it is the true Word of God and that it is binding upon the minds and consciences of all persons. Therefore, if we are being led by God's Holy Spirit, we will conform our thoughts and actions to whatever we find in his Word.

3. *Nothing in the Bible is without value.* Paul's third point is that not only is everything in the Bible for our good and profitable, but nothing that is in the Bible is without value.

John Calvin was strong in this conviction: "This notable passage shows us that the oracles of God contain nothing vain or unprofitable.... It would be an insult to the Holy Spirit to imagine that he had taught us anything which it is of no advantage to know. Let us also know that all that we learn from Scripture is conducive to the advancement of godliness. Although Paul is speaking of the Old Testament, we are to hold the same view of the writings of the apostles. If the Spirit of Christ is everywhere the same, it is quite certain that he has accommodated his teaching to the edification of his people at the present time by the apostles, as he formerly did by the prophets."

Patient Endurance

The second checkpoint we must pass along the road to hope is endurance, which some versions of the Scriptures translate *patience* (King James Version), *perseverance* (New American Standard Bible) or even *patient endurance,* since the word involves both passively accepting what we cannot change and actively pressing on in faithful obedience and discipleship. This word (*hypomonê*) occurs thirty-two times in the New Testament, sixteen times in Paul's writings, six of which are in Romans.

Is Paul saying that endurance comes from the Bible—that is, from knowing the Bible? I raise that question because a detail of the Greek text provokes it. Paul uses the word for through (*dia*) twice, once before the word *endurance* and once before the word *encouragement* (the New International Version omits it the second time). According to the strictest rules of Greek grammar, that should mean that endurance is separated from encouragement with the result that the words "of the Scriptures" should be attached to encouragement only. In other words, Paul would be saying that it is through our own personal enduring as well as through the encouragement that we have in studying the Bible that we find hope.

Leon Morris is a fine Greek scholar, and he is led to this position by his grammatical sensitivity. "[Paul's] construction seems to show that only

encouragement is here said to derive from the Bible," he says.

In my judgment this is a place where it may be wrong to read too much into a fine point of grammar. Grammatically Morris is right. But in terms of the flow of thought it is hard to suppose that Paul is not thinking of the role the Scriptures have in producing endurance too. For one thing, he links the two ideas together in verse 5, saying, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement...." Again, in verse 4 both terms follow Paul's opening words about the use of the Scriptures for teaching: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that..." Or again, even apart from what Paul is saying, elsewhere we are taught that endurance comes from reading how God has kept and preserved other believers even in terrible circumstances.

James wrote, "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:10-11). He is saying that we learn to endure by reading about the way God helped others before us.

Although they recognize the grammatical issue, a large number of other writers nevertheless see the matter as I have oudined it here. Among these are John Murray, Charles Hodge and F. Godet.

Encouragement

The third checkpoint along the road to hope is encouragement, which also comes to us through Scripture. *Encouragement* (*paraklêsis*) is found twenty times in Paul's writings out of twentynine occurrences in the whole New Testament. It occurs three times in Romans.

The interesting thing about this word is that it is virtually the same one Jesus used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit among believers, saying, "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the *Counselor* will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you"

(John 16:7; see 14:26; 15:26), and that the apostle John used to describe the work of Jesus himself: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have *one who speaks to the Father in our defense*—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1). The word *Counselor* and the phrase "one who speaks... in our defense" translate the same Greek word *paraklêtos*, which is also sometimes translated *advocate.* The literal meaning is "one who comes alongside of another person to help him or her," to back the person up or defend him. So together the passages teach that Jesus himself does this for us, the Holy Spirit does it, and the Scriptures do it too. Indeed, it is through the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit chiefly does his work.

The end result of this is hope. In our text the article is present before the word *hope* ("the hope"), meaning the Christian hope. This is not just optimism that Paul is writing about, not a hope founded on something the world thinks possible. Also, the verb *have* is in the present tense, meaning that hope is a present possession. As Calvin says, "The particular service of the Scriptures is to raise those who are prepared by patience and strengthened by consolation to the hope of eternal life, and to keep their thoughts fixed upon it."

An Example from History

But enough analysis! If we are to travel the road of endurance and encouragement to hope by learning from the Scriptures, we should study how it actually works.

There are hundreds of examples of this in the Bible, of course, but let's examine the familiar story of Joseph. Joseph was the next-to-youngest son of Jacob, and he was favored by his father because he was born of his much-beloved wife Rachel and also perhaps because he was an extraordinary young man. His brothers hated him for his virtue so they threw him into a cistern and then sold him to Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt. Joseph was just seventeen years old. In Egypt he became a slave of a rich man named Potiphar. Joseph served the man well, and he was placed in charge of his entire household. Then Potiphar's wife was attracted to Joseph and tried to seduce him. When

Joseph refused to sleep with her, the proud, angry woman denounced him falsely to her husband, and Joseph was thrown into prison.

Joseph languished in prison for two years. Once when he had correctly and favorably interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's cupbearer, predicting that he would be taken from the prison where he too had been confined and restored to his previous position, Joseph asked the man to remember him when he was released and speak a good word to Pharaoh to get him out of prison. But the cupbearer forgot.

The years dragged on. One day God gave a dream to Pharaoh. No one in the palace could interpret it, but the cupbearer remembered Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams and told the king about him. Pharaoh sent for the young man, and Joseph interpreted the dream, predicting seven years of prosperity to be followed by seven years of severe famine. He recommended that the king appoint a wise man to save grain during the good years so that the people would not starve when the years of scarceness came.

You know the story. Pharaoh appointed Joseph to the task. Joseph served well. The land was saved, and in time, when the famine drove Joseph's wicked brothers to Egypt to buy grain, God used Joseph to bring the brothers to repentance. The family was reconciled, and Jacob moved all of them to Egypt, where the people stayed and prospered for many years.

The climax of this great story comes in the final chapter of Genesis, when Jacob dies and the brothers come to plead with Joseph not to take revenge on them. They had completely misunderstood him. He had no intention of doing any of them any harm. "Don't be afraid," he exclaimed. "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:19-20). The story teaches that God is sovereign even in such terrible circumstances as those that overtook Joseph. And from it we learn to trust God's sovereignty, endure in hardship, be encouraged, and so grow strong in hope.

I have picked this particular story because of Psalm 105, which refers to it. It may have been written by King David, but whoever the writer was, he was a man who needed encouragement. He found it in Joseph's story:

> *Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done....*
> *He [God] called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food;*
> *and he sent a man before them— Joseph, sold as a slave.*
> *They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons,*
> *till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the Lord proved him true.*
> *The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free.*
> *He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed,*
> *to instruct his princes as he pleased and teach his elders wisdom.*

Psalm 105:1, 16-22

This writer clearly knew that "everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Do you know that? If you do, you will study what God has spoken and move ahead boldly for him and with hope.

Chapter 220.
A Prayer for Unity

Romans 15:5-6

In the great high priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ, recorded in John 17, Jesus prayed for the church he was about to leave behind, and his prayer was that it might be marked by six important characteristics: joy (v. 13), holiness (v. 17), truth (v. 17), mission (v. 18), unity (vv. 20-23), and love (v. 26). Each of these is prayed for distinctly. But it is

significant that of the six, the one Jesus prayed for at greatest length was unity:

My prayer is not for them alone [the disciples]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:20-23 Clearly this was an area of church life in which Jesus anticipated problems and for which he therefore prayed at length and in strong terms.

In the letter to the Romans Paul is also concerned about the unity of the church, although he has not been talking about it specifically up to this point, probably because he did not know the Roman congregation personally. He knew the churches of Ephesus, Philippi, and Corinth well, and he had much to say about unity when he was writing to them. He had not yet been to Rome. Nevertheless, he was aware of the potential for divisions within the church at Rome, especially because of the differences between the so-called weak and strong believers.

As I pointed out in chapter 209, Paul's instruction about developing a Christian mind was completed in two verses. To discuss a right estimate of oneself and the need to encourage others took six verses more. A call to love one another filled thirteen verses; material on the relationship of the church to the state took seven verses; right conduct in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ took seven verses more. But his discussion of how Christians are to accept other Christians when they do not think or behave as we think they should fills all of chapter 14 and the first half of chapter 15, a total of thirty-five verses. Now, as he comes to the end of this section, he prays for unity among these Roman Christians.

This is a typical Pauline touch. He argues passionately, then suddenly interrupts his argument for prayer. Here he says, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5-6). The verses suggest the nature of this unity and give us its source and goal.

What Kind of Unity?

The word *unity* does not occur very often in Paul's writings. In fact, in the New International Version it is found only four times. One place is in Ephesians 4, where it is used in two significant ways. Verse 3 says, "Make every effort to keep *the unity of the Spirit* through the bond of peace." Verse 13 reads, "... until we all reach *unity in the faith* and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." There are two kinds of unity in these verses. The second type mentioned, in verse 13, is a unity of understanding or of doctrine, and it is referred to as something yet to be attained, since Christians do not have perfect understanding of the teachings of the Bible and therefore differ on some matters. The differences are not desirable—we would like to be of one mind on all doctrinal matters—but they are inevitable given our present, finite understanding of God's truth. These are matters to be worked on together, and they are in areas in which we should see improvement as we mature in Jesus Christ.

The first unity, in verse 3, is different. It is a family unity "of the Spirit," and it is spoken of as something that has already been given to believers and is now their duty to maintain. It is not based on our limited and even mistaken understandings of God's truth, but on the fact that "there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 3:4-5). It is this unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17 and for which Paul is also praying in Romans.

In the Greek text of Romans 15:5, Paul's prayer is literally "that they might mind the same thing" or, as the King James Version has it, that they might "be likeminded one toward another." The emphasis is not on identity of doctrine but on mutuality, appreciation of one another, and thankfulness to be with one another in the body of Christ.

The one other text from Paul's writings in which the word *unity* occurs makes Paul's meaning clear: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Col. 3:12-14). Obviously, what Paul is concerned with here is a set of accepting and forgiving attitudes that recognize other Christians as being part of that one indivisible body of Jesus Christ to which all true Christians belong.

What Christian Unity Is Not

The kind of unity that Paul is praying for is so important that it will be helpful to look at what it is not before we examine what it is. There are two approaches to unity that are particularly wrong.

1. *Organizational unity.* What most people think of first when they think of church unity is some kind of organizational unity, probably because today we tend to think organizationally but also perhaps because this was emphasized for so long by leaders of the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement was an attempt, still somewhat alive but much more lively twenty or thirty years ago, to get all the various denominations of the church to merge. It had several

Protestant forms, the best known of which was COCU, the Consultation on Church Union (which became the Church of Christ Uniting), but it also existed in some places as a movement to bring the Protestant churches into the Church of Rome.

There are some advantages to a certain amount of organizational unity, of course. Otherwise there would be no organizations at all—just Christians living in the world. If there are to be places to meet, paid teachers, schools, missionary endeavors, and so on, there have to be structures to support them. That is why churches that believe alike and have common goals ought to be formally united.

But that is only part of the story. The other part is that in itself organizational unity does not accomplish its goals and, in fact, has actually proved harmful. Church history is the proof. In the early days of the church there was much vitality and rapid growth, but there was very little organization. Later, under the emperor Constantine and his successors, there was a great deal of organization as the church tried to mirror the organizational structure and assume powers parallel to those of the Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages the church was indeed one church. Wherever one went there was one large, interlacing structure with the pope at its head. But this was the period of the church's greatest decadence, to the extent that the world actually cried out against that crushing, tyrannous, superstitious, ignorant thing that called itself Christianity.

2. *Conformity.* Another mistaken notion of the form unity is to take is conformity. This is the chief error of the evangelical church, which, for the most part, is not much concerned with organizational unity. Evangelicals want to maintain their own individual kingdoms and compete with one another for fame and finances. The error of the evangelical church is to strive for an identical pattern of looks and behavior among its members. Some groups train their members in such a way that they end up looking and even speaking alike. Others establish codes of behavior to determine what may and may not be done. Anyone who deviates from these patterns is immediately suspect and may even be judged to be "backsliding" or apostate.

This is not what either Jesus or Paul intended. Paul links his prayer for unity to an acknowledgement that God has made it possible by giving

"endurance" and "encouragement." This has to do with our attitudes rather than with organizational structure or conformity.
Similarly, Jesus prayed for a unity that was a reflection of the oneness within the Godhead: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). A unity like that involves the values, aspirations, goals, and wills of the participating parties.

New Testament Images for the Church

Let's take this a step farther by looking at three images in the New Testament that express the church's unity: the church as a family, the church as a fellowship, and the church as a body.

1. *A family.* Christians belong to the family of God, and therefore they are rightly thought of as brothers and sisters, the most common terms used of Christians for one another in the New Testament and early church. God is called Father, and Christians are called brothers again and again in the Epistles.

What is characteristic of this image is that it speaks of relationships resulting from what God has done for us in salvation. One of the ways salvation is spoken of is God begetting spiritual children. John 1:12-13 speaks of this when it says, "Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. "Jesus spoke of the same reality when he told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Those who are born again have become members of God's family and brothers and sisters to each other.

This has two important consequences. First, since the members of this spiritual family are chosen and brought into it by God, we have no say in this matter and must instead welcome whomever God chooses. It is not for us to say whether we will associate with someone or not. Second, we must be committed to each other in tangible ways. We must be willing and available to help each other, and we must defend each other against a hostile world.

But, as one writer notes, "Although God wants us to be brethren, he does not mean that we are to be identical twins." Siblings are usually quite different. One will be artistic and excel in dancing,
drawing, and singing. Another may be quite bookish. Still another may have strong organizational skills. One may be a morning person, another an evening person. One may want to be with people all the time. Another may prefer to be alone. It is exactly that way in the church, and we should be happy that it is rather than trying to make everyone alike. Paul told the Ephesians this:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ appointed it. This is why it says:

> "When he ascended on high, he led captives in
> his train and gave gifts to men."...

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-13

2. *A fellowship.* The second term that is used to stress the unity of the church is a fellowship. Fellowship isn't an exact word for what the New Testament has in mind, but it is the best word we have in English. In Greek the word is *koinonia*, which has at its root the idea of sharing something or having something in common. For example, partners who held property in common or had shares in a common business were called *koinonoi*. Likewise, the Greek of the New Testament period was called Koine Greek, since it was the language most people shared.

As far as Christians being a fellowship is concerned, the idea is that we hold many things in common and that we try to express this in mutually beneficial ways. That which we most hold in common is the gospel, which is why the New Testament can speak of "fellowship [NIV has

'partnership'] in the gospel" (Phil. 1:5). The New Testament also speaks of "fellowship... with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3), "fellowship with the Spirit" (Phil. 2:1) and "fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7).

How do we express this interlocking, common fellowship? The gospel is something we share *in.* But there are also things we must share *out*—things we should express to and with one another. We need channels to do this, of course, and that is why Christians regularly meet together not just for the worship of God, which we can also do alone, but for fellowship. Sometimes fellowship takes place in large meetings, but it is generally hard to express it in large gatherings. The best place to express this kind of fellowship is in small groups.

We have tried to encourage small groups at Tenth Presbyterian Church. Tenth Church is not huge, but it is large enough to make fellowship in the larger services difficult. Therefore we have divided ourselves up in several ways. We have age-level divisions, with a graded Bible School and college and young adult groups. We have also divided ourselves geographically, with six regional parishes committed to looking out for those within those six regions. To some extent we also divide by interests: Some adult classes meet around a common theme, groups pray for specific aspects of the church's work, and other groups meet to carry out specific ministries. The most important way we divide ourselves for mutual sharing and fellowship is the seventy to one hundred small-group Bible studies, for it is in these more than in any other church meeting that Christians seem to grow and those who are not yet Christians find Christ.

My own personal experience in this area conforms to what John R. W. Stott found in his greater London parish. He wrote, "The value of the small group is that it can become a community of related persons; and in it the benefit of personal relatedness cannot be missed, nor its challenge evaded.... I do not think it is an exaggeration to say, therefore, that small groups, Christian family or fellowship groups, are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity."

3. A *body.* The third great New Testament image for the church is a body, more particularly the body of Christ. This image is so prominent that Charles Colson has made it the title of a recent study of the church.

A number of New Testament books develop this idea, and with differing emphases. Best known perhaps is the section of 1 Corinthians in which Paul writes of the different ways the parts of the body function and how each is needed: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:21-23, 26). In terms of Paul's argument in Romans, this means that the weak need the strong and that the strong also need the weak. There are no dispensable members of Christ's body.

Another important passage is Ephesians 4:16, which emphasizes the work to be done: "From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." This stresses the outward witness and service to others of Christ's church.

We might summarize these three images for the church by saying: (1) "family" stresses our relationship to God (since he is the Father who brings his children into being); (2) "fellowship" stresses our relationship to one another (since we share many things together); and (3) "body" stresses our relationship to those who are without (since we exist to witness to and serve those who do not yet know Christ).

To God Be the Glory

Before I end this study, I want to return to the important purpose clause in our text: "*so that* with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

According to this verse, the purpose of our unity is not so much that the church might be a pleasant place to be or that weak Christians might be

encouraged and strong Christians be channeled into useful work. Rather, it is that God might be glorified. God must be made known as the great and wonderful God he is. Moreover, that is to take place as Christians with *one heart* (that is, in unity) praise him before others *with their mouths.*

From time to time I get letters from or speak to people who say they have trouble with the multiplicity of Christian denominations. In fact, I have a letter on my desk that says this even as I write this paragraph. Their argument is that denominations reflect negatively on the church and weaken its witness.

I am not sure that is the case or even that this is what really concerns these people. No one criticizes capitalism because there are many competing corporations, or the automobile industry because there is fierce rivalry between the Big Three auto makers or between American companies and their Japanese or European counterparts. As I said at the beginning, a certain amount of organization is inevitable and some centralization is desirable. For the most part the world understands organizational multiplicity.

I don't think that the world is even particularly troubled by the fact that Christians disagree on some doctrinal matters. After all, they disagree with other people too.

The real problem is that Christians often do not appreciate and support one another, recognizing that whatever differences may exist, all who are Christ's followers nevertheless belong to the same family, fellowship, and body and therefore belong to one another. That is how, above all other ways, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ must be glorified by us before the watching world.

Chapter 221.
The Example of Our Lord: Part 2

Romans 15:7-9

In chapter 218 we studied the way Jesus did not seek to please himself but rather sought first to please the Father and then those whom he had come to serve. Paul taught that we are to be like him in this, as well as in other things. "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (Rom. 15:2). In the verses to which we come now Jesus is declared an example in the way he accepted others, regardless of who they were or what they had done: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy" (Rom. 15:7-9).

This command follows clearly and obviously from the call to unity in the preceding verses, for the way to maintain Christian unity is to accept those other women and men for whom Jesus died.

A Multifractured World

When Christianity burst upon the world after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it found it an extremely divided place. Some of the divisions were nationalistic—Greeks hating the Romans who had overpowered them and dominated the Mediterranean, and Romans looking down on nearly all the conquered and therefore "inferior" peoples of the then-known world. Some divisions were racial, as between Romans and Greeks and Jews and Arabs. Many of those divisions reached back over centuries of hatred and some persist today, fueling tensions that continue to disturb the Near East. There were rivalries between cities, resolved only when one city destroyed the other, as Rome did Carthage and Sparta, Athens. Some of the divisions were religious.

The sharpest and most intractable of all these divisions was between the religion of the Jews, with its strict Old Testament monotheism, and the religions of the Gentiles, with their many pagan gods. The Jews looked down on Gentiles as heathens, just as the Greeks counted as barbarians all who did not know their language.

It is hard for us to imagine how deep these divisions were at the time of Christ's coming, though we can get an idea of it from an honest look at hatreds in our own day. But as real as these divisions were, the remarkable thing is that *they did not divide the Christians.* Christians simply transcended them, so that the church from the very beginning was composed of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, Greeks and Romans, blacks and whites, rich and poor, and so forth. The church at Antioch, which backed Paul on his missionary journeys, is a superb example. It had as its leaders Barnabas, who was a Jew from Cyprus; Simeon, a black man; Lucius, who was probably a Roman, from Cyrene; Manaen, an aristocrat who had been raised with Herod the tetrarch; and Saul, the Jewish teacher from Tarsus (cf. Acts 13:1). What a collection—and what an effective church!

How could people this diverse come together and function so fruitfully? They knew Jesus, the very Son of God; they knew that he had accepted them without condition, sinners that they were, and therefore they had to accept all others for whom he had also died.

The word *accept* (which also means welcome or receive) is the key, and it goes back to Romans
14:1, where this section of the letter started. Paul did not know the Christians at Rome personally, but he knew human nature, even in Christians, and he wanted to be sure that those who considered themselves to be strong in faith would not look down on those they considered weak, and that the weak would not shun the strong. So he wrote, "*Accept* him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." In fact, he also made the point he is making again in chapter 15, when he added as an explanation and a motivation for us, "... for God has *accepted* him" (v. 3). In Romans 14:3 he points out that the Father has accepted the other Christian. In Romans 15:7 he reminds us that Jesus has accepted him too. So we ask: With that kind of welcome, who are we to hold to our petty prejudices or keep up our damaging rejection of other Christians?

Jews and Gentiles in Christ's Fold

From Paul's perspective the greatest of all possible divisions was the one between Jews, who were God's specifically chosen people, and Gentiles, who apart from Christ were "foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Therefore, that is what he deals with specifically in Romans 15:8, saying, "Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." What he means is that Jesus served the Jews to fulfill the promises made to them regarding his coming to die for sin and be their Savior, in order that he might be not only their Savior but the Savior of the Gentiles too.

1. *Christ became a servant to the Jews.* If Paul said only that "Jesus" became a servant to the Jews, that would not have been a particularly remarkable statement, since anyone could reasonably choose to be a servant to his or her people. But Paul writes "Christ" rather than "Jesus," and *Christ* means Messiah. The Jews expected the Messiah to be a king who would rule on the throne of David to drive the Romans out of Palestine. A king is served by others. They live to meet his needs; he is not their servant. But Jesus was not that kind of Messiah. He told his disciples, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). He said of his kingdom, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

2. *To confirm the promises made to the patriarchs.* Jesus served the Jews, but he did it in God's way rather than theirs. The people wanted a hero. In fact, they were ready to make him king on several occasions, and when he did not meet their materialistic expectations—giving them free meals, for instance—they quickly turned against him. What God wanted was for him to be their Savior, and that is what the promises to the patriarchs meant. These men were told of a

Redeemer who would come, and they were saved by looking to him and trusting him for what he would one day do. Paul explained this to the

Galatians, saying, "He [Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:14).

3. *So that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.* The fulfillment of the promises to the Jewish patriarchs was not intended for the blessing of Jews alone but for the salvation of Gentiles too so that they along with Jews might glorify God for his mercy. This is the argument of Romans 9-11 telescoped into just one verse. As Paul said to Gentiles toward the close of that argument, "Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Rom. 11:30-32).

This, then, is the first important example of Jesus' acceptance of other people: He died for
Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul is telling the Jews, who would have tended to look down on Gentile members of the Roman church, that since God has accepted the Gentiles they should not refuse them.

A Friend of Sinners

Jesus' acceptance of others is not limited to Jews and Gentiles, however; it is astonishing and allembracing. Here are some other types of people he accepted:

1. *Sinners.* "Jesus, what a friend of sinners!" we sing in one of our most popular hymns. It is right that we sing it, for that is exactly what he is. One of his disciples was Levi (Matthew), who had been a tax collector, and when he became a follower of Christ, Levi invited his friends to meet Jesus. His friends were not well thought of by the Jewish leaders —they called them "sinners"—so they demanded of Jesus, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Luke 5:30).

Jesus replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (v. 31).

One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is the account of Jesus' dealing with the woman who had been caught in adultery, recorded in John 8. The leaders of the people were using her to try to trap Jesus and discredit him, because when they brought her to Jesus, frightened and humiliated, they demanded, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (vv. 4-5). It must have been a set-up, of course. In order to have witnesses who would satisfy the rigorous demands of Jewish jurisprudence they would have had to have placed spies in the room or at the keyhole. It was a hateful, devilish thing to have done. But it was clever. Because if Jesus had replied, "Forgive her!" they would have denounced him for having rejected God's law. No authentic messenger of God would do that. On the other hand, if he had said, "Stone her!" they would have condemned him for harsh insensitivity, and perhaps hypocrisy too. For he had also said, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

"Ah, but what does he do when you do come?" they would have asked. "He tells people to stone you. What kind of a Savior is that?"

We know what Jesus did. First, he caused each of the woman's accusers to be convicted by his own sins, which must have been many. One by one they slunk away. Then, when the people who could have condemned her were gone he said, "Neither do I condemn you.... Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). He did not excuse her behavior. In fact, he told her to change her way of life. But rather than rejecting her, he accepted her as one of those many sinners for whom he was very soon to die.

2. *Outcasts.* Tax collectors were social outcasts. Jesus showed his acceptance of them by having one tax collector, Matthew (or Levi), within the select company of his disciples. Even greater outcasts than the hated tax collectors were lepers. They were banned from

all normal human contact and were required to remain outside the city gates, lest they contaminate others with their disease. Jesus accepted even these, and he gave tangible evidence of his acceptance by touching and speaking to them when he healed them. One healing is reported in Luke 5. A poor leper came to him begging, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (Luke 5:12).

The text says, "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' And immediately the leprosy left him" (vv. 12-13). It was a remarkable display of grace for him to touch such disease-stricken people. Yet he did it, and when he did the lepers as well as other outcast people were made whole.

3. *The unclean.* In Mark 5 is recorded the story of an "unclean" woman who touched Jesus. She had been suffering from bleeding for twelve years. Any kind of bodily discharge, including bleeding, made people ceremonially unclean so that others could not come in contact with them, even touching their clothing or sitting where they had been sitting, without becoming unclean too. If a person was unclean, he could not go to the temple or share in other normal human activities. The state of the woman must have been one of painful isolation and loneliness. When she learned that Jesus was coming, however, she followed after him and dared to reach out and touch his cloak, thinking, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed" (v. 28).

The woman was healed. Her bleeding ceased immediately. Yet she must have been terrified when Jesus suddenly stopped, turned around in the crowd, and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" (v. 30). The frightened woman came forward, no doubt expecting a rebuke for having touched and thus "contaminated" the great teacher. But Jesus did not treat her as one who had done wrong; rather, he commended her for her faith. "Daughter," he said to her, "your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (v. 34).

A few verses later it is told that Jesus went to the home of a synagogue ruler and touched his dead daughter, bringing her back to life. The dead were regarded as unclean too, and coming in contact with a dead body defiled a "clean" person for about a week. Yet Jesus did not hesitate to touch the dead any more than he failed to touch the lepers. He accepted even the most unclean and healed them by doing it.

That would be remarkable if Jesus were only a man. We admire that kind of acceptance when we see it in other people. For the very Son of God to accept sinners, the outcast, and the unclean is utterly wonderful.

Christ's Acceptance of Us

Yet I will tell you something that is even more wonderful than Jesus' acceptance of the sinful, outcast, and unclean people of his day, and that is his acceptance of you and me. True, we may not be "sinners" in the way the righteous persons of Jesus' day meant it when they used that word—that is, those who were in open defiance of the Pharisees' prevailing moral code. We may not be outcasts, pariahs to our neighbors, as the lepers were, or unclean in the Jewish ceremonial sense. But we are sinners in thought, word, and deed. We are outcasts by our own deliberate actions, having turned our backs on God, trampling his mercy underfoot. In the true sense of the word *unclean*, we have by our many moral transgressions become filthy from head to toe. We are unclean even in our supposed righteousness, for in the sight of God "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6).

Can you imagine how you in your sin, apart from Christ, must appear to the holy God? You cannot. None of us can see ourselves as God sees us. On the contrary, we think highly of ourselves, dismiss our sins as mere mistakes or shortcomings, and compliment ourselves on how well we are doing. But God tells us how he sees us. Remember Romans 3:10-18:

> *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*

All have turned away, they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good, not even one."
"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."
"Their mouths are full of cursings and bitterness."
"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

That is how God sees you apart from Christ, as a creature utterly abhorrent to him and as a menace to others. But in spite of that fact, the Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, accepted you and died for you in order to bring you into his righteous kingdom. And God the Father has accepted you too. How, then, can you possibly exclude anyone else? You must accept them, as you have been accepted. And, for that matter, you must not only love Christians; you must also love and seek to bring to Christ all who are not yet Christians—for his sake and for his glory.

To God Be the Glory

As we close, let's reconsider Romans 15:9: "... so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." It is parallel to the phrase that ends the previous two verses, drawing these two sections together: "... so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 6). We are to be united in spirit as God's people, so that God may be glorified; and we are to accept others, as Jesus has accepted us, so that God may be glorified. It is by accepting others that our unity is to be expressed and carried forward.

How God is glorified by that is seen in what I call a biblical understanding of history. Long ago, before God's creation of the heavens and earth and of the people who live on it, God dwelt in glory with his holy angels and everything was harmonious. There was one will in the universe; that will was God's, and it was accepted as good everywhere and unquestionably. But one day Lucifer got it into his head

that he could do better than God—that his way was better—and when that happened the original harmony of the universe was broken and division came in. Lucifer became the devil; for devil comes from the Greek word *diabolos,* and *diabolos* means disrupter—one who always stirs things up, bringing frustration, anger, sin, and disharmony.

God could have annihilated Satan at once, blotting out the evil. But if he had done that, he would only have shown that he was more powerful than Satan, not that his way was best or that he could restore harmony even out of chaos. So instead of destroying Satan, God let evil run its course. The devil was allowed to work havoc, doing his best to ruin God's creation. He was even allowed to enter the brave new world that God created, drawing Adam and Eve, our first parents, after him in his rebellion against God. But all the devil was able to show was that he could increase the world's disharmony, not make the universe run smoothly or make people better able to accept and love one another. He could turn paradise, the Garden of Eden, into hell (by God's permission), but he could not turn that hell back into paradise.

But God was not finished. Unknown to Satan, God had planned to redeem a select number of people out of the great mass of fallen humanity that the devil was corrupting. So he did it, sending Jesus Christ to die for them to be their Savior from sin and sending the Holy Spirit to give them a new nature. And thus, these weak, fallen human beings became the arena where God demonstrated his ability to bring his people together again, as they were moved to accept each other in Christ because they had been accepted. Thus they glorified God, and God confounded Satan.

John Calvin said it like this: "As Christ has made known the glory of the Father in receiving us all into his grace when we stood in need of mercy, so we ought to establish and confirm this union which we have in Christ, in order to make known also the glory of God."

Chapter 222.

Hope of the Gentiles

Romans 15:9-12

We have already seen several instances of a striking feature of Paul's writing—developing an argument first, then supporting it with quotations from the Old Testament. Paul did that in Romans 3:10-18, supporting his doctrine of human depravity with at least six Old Testament quotations, and then repeatedly in chapters 9-11 and again in chapters 12 and 14. We also see this here, in chapter 15, at the close of his lengthy explanation of why Christians must accept all other Christians. He quotes four Old Testament texts: Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1, and Isaiah 11:10.

Much to our surprise, however, the point the citations make is not the major point of this section, which deals with our accepting other Christians. Rather, they support the point made in a minor way in Romans 15:8-9 only—namely, that Jesus became a servant of the Jews by fulfilling the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs "so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." This point is not made anywhere else in chapters 12-16 but rather in Romans 9-11.

This tells us that "hope for the Gentiles" was a major component of Paul's thinking. We know this was important to Paul personally, because he often reminded people that he was chosen by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles. In fact, he does so just three and four verses further on, in Romans 15:15-16: "I have written to you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

This was also important to Paul as an expression of the fullness of the biblical revelation, which taught that salvation would eventually come to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. This was a major part of his argument in chapters 9-11. We sense something of the importance Paul attached to this truth from the fact that here, in chapter 15, his citations

are drawn from every part of the Old Testament: from the law (Deut. 32:43), the prophets (Isa. 11:10), and the writings (Ps. 18:49; 117:1).

If we are Gentiles, as most in the church today are, this truth should be important to us too.

Without Hope and without God

The first point we need to consider is that there was no hope for the Gentiles apart from Jesus Christ. Earlier in Romans Paul asked whether there was any advantage in being a Jew, and he answered, "Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Rom. 3:2). He meant that the Jews had the Bible, while the Gentiles did not. Paul interrupted his listing of the Jewish advantages there, but he picked it up again in chapter 9, adding, "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ" (vv. 4-5). The Gentiles had none of these advantages. Therefore, Paul was able to tell the Ephesians, who were Gentiles, that before they had heard about Christ and had believed on him, they were "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

That is a very grim assessment. But if "salvation is from the Jews," as Jesus told the woman of Samaria (John 4:22), meaning that God had been working with Jews almost exclusively from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus Christ, then it is accurate. It means that for those many centuries in which God was working exclusively with Israel, there was literally no hope of salvation for the masses of the world who were not Jewish.

The Voice of Prophecy

Fortunately, this former absence of hope is not the final word for Gentiles since Gentile salvation was nevertheless also promised in the Old Testament. Paul has already taught this in Romans 9, supporting it, as he does in Romans 15, by citations from the Old Testament (Hosea

2:23, 1:10; Isaiah 10:22-23 and 1:9); in Romans 10:20, and again in Romans 11, where he spoke of Jewish branches being broken off the Jews' own olive tree so that Gentile branches might be grafted in, concluding, "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (v. 25). When we begin to notice the many verses Paul cites, we get a glimpse of how carefully and persistently he must have had to argue this truth when teaching it to the Jewish and Gentile churches.

There is a progression to the four texts he cites in Romans 15. In the first (Ps. 18:49), the psalmist, a Jew, is praising God *among the Gentiles.* In the second (Deut. 32:43), the Gentiles are called upon to rejoice *along with Israel.* In the third (Ps. 117:1), the Gentiles are invited to praise God *on their own.* Finally, in the fourth (Isa. 11:10), it is shown that this was made possible by him who is *both the Jewish and the Gentile king.* It is valuable to look at each of these texts individually.

1. *Psalm 18:49.* The first quotation is from Psalm 18, a thanksgiving song in which David looks back over a lifetime of saving interventions and praises God for them. It was apparently written after David's deliverance from Saul, the kings of the many hostile states that surrounded Israel, and the armies commanded by David's rebellious son, Absalom.

At first glance there does not seem to be anything unusual about the psalm, a song by a Jewish king thanking God for, among other things, his victories over the surrounding Gentile nations. But suddenly toward the end of the psalm David declares that he is going to praise God not merely "to" but also "among the [Gentile] nations." This implies that the Gentiles are going to have a part in this praise, listening to it certainly but perhaps also praising God along with David. This is what Paul picks up on when he quotes verse 49 in Romans. He is saying that David looked forward to a day when the Gentiles would know the true God and praise him along with Jews, such as himself.

2. *Deuteronomy 32:43.* The second quotation comes from Deuteronomy 32, which contains the Song of Moses composed for the people of Israel shortly before his death. Songs or hymns are a means of praising God, but they also often have a teaching function, and that is the case here. A major portion of the hymn reminds the people of the ways God has been good to them (vv. 7-14), while other portions warn them not to depart from the worship of God lest terrible things happen.

Again, like Psalm 18, one would expect this song to be limited in its outlook, thinking of Israel only. But again, like Psalm 18, it also has the other nations in view. Verse 8 is the first verse to strike this more universal note, for it pictures God as "the Most High" who gives each of the nations its portion of the earth's land as an inheritance. The same thing happens again in verse 21, which Paul has already quoted in Romans 10:19: "I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding." The final place this occurs is in verse 43, quoted in Romans 15, which calls on the Gentiles to rejoice together with the Jewish people when God takes vengeance on his enemies and makes atonement for his land and people.

Paul surely would have taken this as a reference to the death of Christ, after which the gospel was preached to Gentiles specifically. It was at this point that Paul's own ministry came into this prophetic forecast of history.

3. *Psalm 117:1.* The third quotation carries the progression Paul has been developing a bit further. In the first (Ps. 18:49), David was praising God among the Gentiles. In the second (Deut. 32:43), Gentiles are praising God along with the Jews. In this verse, from Psalm 117, the Gentiles are praising God on their own.

Psalm 117 is remarkable for being the shortest psalm in the psalter. But even though it is only two verses long, it has one of the broadest outlooks of any psalm. It is directed to the nations of the world and its peoples, all of whom are called upon to praise Jehovah God for the

greatness of "his love toward us" and his "faithfulness," which endures forever. The phrase "his love toward us" might be thought of as meaning his love to Israel only, but that would be contrary to the spirit of the psalm. Therefore, most commentators take it either as God's love "toward the whole family of man," as Charles Spurgeon thought, or of his love for everyone shown by his love for Israel in fulfilling the promises of blessing made to Abraham by sending Jesus Christ to be the world's Savior. Because of the way Paul handled this subject in Romans 9, we are probably right to suppose that he is thinking of God's love in this way in citing Psalm 117:1.

4. *Isaiah 11:10.* The final quotation comes from Isaiah 11, a chapter that speaks of a future descendant of David who will rule as a great king and bring in a day of universal blessing. The opening part of the chapter is often read at Christmas as a prophecy of Christ's advent:

> A shoot will come up from the
> stump of Jesse; from his roots a
> Branch will bear fruit.
> *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of*
> *wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and*
> *power,*
> *the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD— and*
> *he will delight in the fear of the LORD.*
>
> *He will not judge by what he sees with eyes, or decide by*
> *what he hears with his ears;*
> *but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with*
> *justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.*
>
> *Isaiah 11:1-4*

The chapter goes on to envision a day of glorious messianic blessing in which "the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them" (v. 6). It speaks of a time in which "they will neither

harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9). Then comes the text Paul quotes in Romans: "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him" (v. 10).

Jesse was the father of David. So the text is looking forward to that promised descendant of
David who will bring in the messianic age. Paul is saying that the age of blessing has begun by
Christ's coming, and that the hope of the Gentiles is in him. This is the main point of Romans 15:9-12, of course. For Paul is not just saying that the Gentiles should be hopeful in the sense that people should never give up hope, or that even the Gentile religions have something going for them. He is saying rather that they have hope because of Jesus Christ. There is hope for Gentiles because Jesus is the Savior of the world and not just the Savior of the Jews. **America's Spiritual Decline**

When Paul quotes Isaiah as saying that "the Gentiles will hope in him [that is, in Christ]," he is thinking of personal salvation, of course. Yet I cannot look at this text without thinking that it also applies to cultures, particularly American culture, and of the only hope we or any other people have to avoid utter spiritual bankruptcy and chaos. Romans 15:12 (quoting Isaiah 11:10) does speak of "the nations," after all, and we are one of them.

Not long ago someone gave me a copy of a speech William J. Bennett gave to a special twentieth-anniversary gathering of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank based in Washington, D.C. Bennett served as secretary of education under President Ronald Reagan and later as drug czar under President George Bush. His address, called "Getting Used to Decadence," spoke to America's decline.

Bennett told of a conversation he had with a friend who lives in Asia about how America is perceived today by foreigners. According to Bennett's friend, the world continues to look on America as the leading economic and military power on earth. But, he said, "this same world no longer beholds us with the moral respect it once did. When the rest of the world looks at America... they no longer see a 'shining city on a hill.' Instead they see a society in decline, with exploding rates of crime and social pathologies." Foreigners who come to the United States these days no longer come hopefully but in fear. And they have cause to be fearful—a record number of them get killed here.

Early in 1993, through the Heritage Foundation, Bennett released a book titled *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators,* tracing changes in American behavior over the past thirty years (1960-90). There are a few relatively good signs: Since 1960, the population has increased 41 percent; the gross domestic product has nearly tripled; and total social spending by all levels of government (measured in constant 1990 dollars) has risen from $142.73 billion to $787.00 billion—more than a fivefold increase.

But during the same thirty-year period there has been a 560 percent increase in violent crime; more than a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorces; a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a 200 percent increase in the teenage suicide rate; and a drop of 75 points in the average S.A.T. scores of high school students. Today 30 percent of all births are illegitimate, and, according to Bennett, "By the end of the decade, according to the most reliable projections, 40 percent of all births and 80 percent of minority births will occur out of wedlock."

In 1940 teachers were asked to identify the top problems in America's schools. They answered: talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the hall, cutting in line, dress code infractions, and littering. When they were asked the same question in 1990, they identified drug use, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.

Within my lifetime, says Bennett, the United States was looked upon as the bright moral conscience of the world. Today we have topped the industrialized world in murders, rapes, and violent crime. We are near the top in rates of abortions, divorces, and unwed births. In elementary and secondary education we are near the bottom in students' achievement scores.

And this is not the greatest problem. The greatest problem, according to Bennett, is that we have gotten used to this condition. We have accepted it. There is no shame, no protest, no outrage, no anger.

Not long ago a person who mugged and almost killed a seventy-two-year-old man was shot by a police officer while fleeing the scene of the crime. A jury awarded him $4.3 million in damages, and no one protested. In California the trial of the two Menendez brothers, charged for killing their elderly parents with a shotgun, resulted in a hung jury. The jurors believed the psychiatrists' defense that they must have been somehow psychologically abused.

Bennett traces our problem to what the ancients called *acedia*, borrowing a term meaning "an aversion to and a negation of spiritual things." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian author and expatriate, called it "spiritual exhaustion." The late American novelist Walker Percy described it as America's "weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed and in the end helplessness before its great problems."

Bennett himself called it "a corruption of the heart." Contrasting America's material prosperity with its spiritual impoverishment, he observed, "If we have full employment and greater economic growth—if we have cities of gold and alabaster—but our children have not learned how to walk in goodness, justice, and mercy, then the American experiment, no matter how gilded, will have failed."

Savior of the Nations

As Christians, we did not need William Bennett to tell us that apart from Jesus Christ all people have "corruption of the heart." But we are

indebted to him for tracing so graphically what happens when a culture turns its back on God, as ours has done.

Paul's phrase describing the Ephesians before they came to Christ was "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Our culture wants to be "without God," but it is discovering that to be without God also means to be without hope. We must remind everyone that where there is
God, there is hope, and that Jesus Christ is still what Martin Luther called *der Heiden Heiland*, "the Savior [and, therefore, the hope] of the Gentiles."

Chapter 223.
The First Benediction

Romans 15:13

There is a sense in which the Book of Romans ends with the thirteenth verse of chapter fifteen, because what follows is essentially personal in nature. Paul did not always end his letters with such remarks, and this one would have been complete without them. Besides, Romans 15:13 would have been a great ending.

I have called this study "The *First* Benediction" because there will be two more benedictions before we end—Romans 15:33 and Romans 16:20—followed by a doxology in Romans 16:2527. Each benediction is important, but this is a particularly important and comprehensive one.

Donald Grey Barnhouse devoted six studies to this verse in his radio series on Romans. (They were reduced to one in book form.) He says, "This verse is a great summary of the blessed life in the brotherhood formed by our oneness in Jesus Christ. The *source* of that life is the God of hope. The *measure* of that life is that we shall be filled 'with all joy and peace.' The *quality of* that life is joy and peace which he desires for us. The *condition* of that life is faith—we enter it by believing. The *purpose* of that life is that we might abound. The *enabling* of that life is

divine power. And the *director* of that life is the Holy Spirit." So clearly, this is a very practical verse.

Romans 15:13 is a prayer, which leads Leon Morris to say, "We should not think of Paul primarily as a controversialist; he was a deeply pious man and it is characteristic that he finishes not with some equivalent of Q.E.D. [*quod erat demonstrandum*, meaning 'which was to be demonstrated'] nor a shout of triumph over the antagonists he has confronted but with a prayer."

The God of Hope

The obvious place to begin this study is with the word *hope*, because it is the first key word and occurs twice, once at the beginning and once at the end.

What is striking here is that Paul links hope to God, speaking of "the God of hope." This can point to God as the source of hope (a subjective genitive), or it can point to God as the object of hope (an objective genitive). Both are true. God is the source of hope because he is the source of every good thing. But he is also the object of hope, since we have hope in him and not in the weak things advanced as objects of hope by our secular sinful world.

Paul is not saying to "keep a stiff upper lip" or "look for the silver lining" or "never, never, never give up" when he speaks of the Christian's hope. To be hopeful is a human characteristic possessed in large measure by great men and women, and we admire it. But if that is all we are talking about in terms of our spiritual state, it would be utter deception and delusion. This is because without God our condition is literally, thoroughly, unmistakably, and unalterably hope*less*. We are indeed "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

As soon as we bring God into the picture the situation is reversed. Now we have hope through the work of Jesus Christ, because God himself is our hope and has given hope to us.

Nothing else can be that or do that. If you put your hope in other people, they will let you down. If you trust your stocks or bonds or bank accounts, you will find that they can disappear overnight. In any case, they are not ultimately satisfying. Health will fail. Houses can burn. Jobs can be lost. Even great nations enter periods of economic and moral decline. But the one who has his or her hope from God and trusts God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ can stand firm in anything. Edward Mots expressed it in one of our best-known hymns:

> My hope is built on nothing less
> Than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, But wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.
> His oath, his covenant, his blood
> Support me in the whelming flood; When all around my soul gives away, He then is all my Hope and Stay. On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.

Paul spoke of this hope when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth, describing himself as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:10).

Abounding in Joy

Joy is one of Paul's great concepts since, as Leon Morris points out, "the term occurs in his writings twenty-one times and no other New Testament writing has it more than John's nine times." He links it to faith in Philippians 1:25 ("I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith") and with the other fruits of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 ("But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control").

Yet Paul didn't invent the idea. He received it from Jesus, who spoke of it, along with peace, as his gift to his disciples before his departure. Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Speaking of his death he

added, "Now is your time for grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22). Later in his high priestly prayer, recorded in John 17, Jesus said to his Father, "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them" (v. 13).

This joy has its source in God, since "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

This means that the Christian's joy is not a matter of natural human endowments or nice circumstances. It is supernatural in origin and in the way it expresses itself in spite of circumstances. Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, "It is not a question of being an extrovert or an introvert. Some people are by nature gloomy and morose. In the days of superstition it was thought that such had been born under the influence of Saturn, and so they were called saturnine. Other people are buoyant and outgoing, and this was attributed to their being born under the influence of the planet Jupiter, so they were called jovial. But jovial people are sometimes plunged into the deepest despair and gloom when something goes contrary to their selfish desires. And contrariwise, some who are naturally despondent learn to settle upon the eternal Rock, and are filled with a deep and steadfast joy, which does not have its spring in this natural life."

In the prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus indicated that we should have "the full measure" of this divine joy within. But we don't always; that is why he prayed for it on our behalf.

We find much the same thing in our text in Romans, for Paul is praying that God might fill the Roman believers with "all joy and peace as you trust in him." This teaches that there are degrees of these blessings for Christians; and this must mean that although many have them, not all are filled with them. Instead of being mostly empty of blessings, you should be filled to the brim.

Two Kinds of Peace

Two kinds of peace are spoken of in the Bible: peace *with* God and the peace *of* God. Thus far in Romans the first meaning has dominated, because Paul has been trying to show how sinners, who are naturally at war with God, might find peace with God through the cross of Christ. Here, however, he is talking about personal peace, the peace of heart and mind that God gives.

William Barclay in his commentary on Romans writes about how people naturally want peace but lose it due to inner tensions or disturbing circumstances:

The ancient philosophers sought for what they called *ataraxia*, the untroubled life. They wanted above all serenity, that serenity which is proof alike against the shattering blows and the petty pinpricks of human existence. One would almost say that today serenity is a lost possession.

There are two things which make serenity impossible. (a) There is the *inner tension.* Men live a distracted life, for the word *distract* literally means *to pull apart.* So long as a man is a walking civil war, so long as he himself is a battleground, so long as he is a split personality, there can obviously be no such thing as serenity. There is only one way out of this, and that is for self to abdicate to Christ. When Christ controls the tension is gone. (b) There is *worry about external things.* There are many who are haunted by the chances and the changes of life. H. G. Wells tells how in New York harbor he was once on a liner. It was foggy, and suddenly out of the fog there loomed another liner, and the two ships slid past each other with only yards to spare. He was suddenly face to face with what he called the general large dangerousness of life. It is hard not to worry, for man is characteristically a creature who looks forward to guess and fear. The only end to that worry is the utter conviction that, whatever happens, God's hand will never cause his child a needless tear. Things will happen that we cannot understand, but if we are sure enough of love, we can accept with serenity even those things which wound the heart and baffle the mind.

What that is all about, if we speak in theological terms, is faith in the sovereignty of God—that God is in control and that he never lets anything come into the lives of one of his children that he has not ordained for that person for his or her ultimate good. A person who really trusts in God's sovereignty will have a peace that others cannot even comprehend.

Trust in Him

The fourth of the key terms Paul puts together in this verse is *faith,* or *trust* as the New
International Version has it. Faith is the indispensable channel for blessings, as they come from God but become ours only as we trust in him.

This is not so mysterious. It is simply a matter of believing God when he tells us who he is and what he has done and will continue to do for his people. I am convinced that the most important of all differences between people is precisely at this point, not whether they are intelligent or unintelligent, kind or unkind, joyful or taciturn, people-oriented or loners, but whether or not they will trust God. Christians by very definition are believers; non-Christians are unbelievers. But I mean more than this. I mean that even professing Christians differ fundamentally in regard either to trusting or not trusting God, either believing him or questioning what he says.

In his study of this verse Donald Grey Barnhouse illustrates this by citing the way some Bible critics reacted when so-called errors they believed they had found in the Bible were explained. They began by creating a series of arguments for why intelligent people could no longer trust the Bible—call them arguments A, B, C, and D. These stood for a while because biblical scholarship is slow. Yet as the years went by arguments A and B were refuted by a better knowledge of the Bible and of the times of the writing of the biblical documents. By this time these same unbelieving critics had developed arguments E, F, G, and H. Scholarship crawled on and eventually explained these problems. But now the critics had arguments I, J, K, L, and M. And so it has gone. Eventually they ran out of letters and had to start again!

We might expect that such people would learn from what has happened, but they do not. In the meantime, however, as Barnhouse writes, "While this parade of doubt passes by, there is the quiet march of men of faith who are filled with all joy and peace in believing, because they have been filled by the God of hope who establishes, strengthens and settles them."

I have often called attention to Charles Haddon Spurgeon's remark that he was willing to be thought a fool today, knowing that in twenty or thirty years his faith in the Word of God would be vindicated, and chiding those who aspired to seem wise now by attacking the Scriptures but who would look foolish in a decade or so's time.

Learn to trust God. You will find that as you trust him you will grow stronger in your faith and that you will become ever more firmly settled in the wonderful doctrines taught us in the Bible. Moreover, you will discover something of the perfect joy and peace of believing God. Hymn writer Thomas Kelly (1769-1855) wrote this:

> Trust in him, ye saints, forever;
> He is faithful, changing never;
> Neither force nor guile can sever
> Those he loves from him.

Powered by the Holy Spirit

The fifth and last of the great biblical words found in Romans 15:13 is *power,* in the phrase "by the power of the Holy Spirit." In the Greek it is the word *dynamis*, not *exousia* (which is sometimes also translated as power but actually means authority). It is a power that gets things done.

This phrase reminds us that nothing of any spiritual value is possible in and of ourselves since, as Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We cannot believe unless we are enabled to believe by God (Eph. 2:8). We cannot find peace unless we submit our requests to God by prayer and earnest petition (Phil. 4:6-7). Joy comes only from God and is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's work within (Gal. 5:22). Hope is impossible (Eph. 2:12). But while these blessings are

impossible for any of us to achieve by ourselves, everything is possible for God who makes them possible for us and in us by his Spirit's power. In fact, God promises to bless us in all these ways if we will trust him, and it is for this that Paul is praying in Romans 15.

By ending with a reference to "the power of the Holy Spirit," the prayer that is our text both begins and ends with God. This is an important point, and it is one that should be familiar to us by now since it is exactly what we found in Romans 11:36, which closed the long doctrinal section of the epistle. It ended with a doxology, the final words of which were:

> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Everything in this whole universe begins with God, is accomplished by God's agency, and exists for God's glory. But if that is true of the inanimate universe—the world of plants and trees, of suns and planets, of quasars, quarks, and black holes—it is certainly true of salvation. It is true of you, if you are a Christian. You exist because God created you. You believe because he worked faith in you and sustains it in you by the power of his Holy Spirit. He does this that you might live to his glory now and indeed forever.

Left to ourselves we can do nothing. Even as saved people we would fall at the first wisp of temptation or the first blast of Satan's death-dealing blows. But because God is for us we can stand firm and triumph. That is why Thomas Kelly continues, in the hymn from which I quoted earlier:

> Keep us Lord, O keep us cleaving
> To thyself and still believing,
> Till the hour of our receiving
> Promised joys from thee.

Finally, we note that according to our text, all this is so Christians "might overflow with hope." That is Paul's emphasis, his conclusion. To put it in temporal sequence: God, who is the source of hope, is asked to

fill believers with joy and peace through their learning to trust in him, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit's working they might overflow with the hope of which God the Father is the source.

This is the fourth mention of hope in this chapter (vv. 4, 12, 13 twice) and the third since verse 12. So obviously it is Paul's main concern and should be ours also, especially since we live in an age that is so lacking in hope. As I look around me today I sense that people have lost hope in nearly everything. They have no faith in politicians or the economy or justice from the courts or even safety from those authorized to provide it. They do not even have faith in themselves. And they are without God, and therefore there is no hope for them in this world.

What an opportunity for God's people! Robert Haldane says, "The people of God have high hopes." Indeed we do. We have divine, uplifting, great, overwhelming, and overpowering hopes. So let's *be* hopeful. Abound in hope—and let the world know why.

Part Twenty-One.

Paul's Personal Ministry and Plans

Chapter 224.
Check-off Points for a Good Church

Romans 15:14

Have you ever come to the end of something that has been exceptionally nice and found yourself feeling a bit sad about it? Maybe a vacation? Or a night at the opera? Children feel sad when Christmas is over, though their parents are usually rejoicing.

We have something like that now. We are coming to the end of our study of Paul's great letter to the Romans. In it Paul has unfolded the Christian doctrine of justification by faith in all its many ramifications. He has demonstrated its necessity, described what God did to bring it about through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, explained how it works itself out by the power of the Holy Spirit in individual lives to give a permanent and sure salvation, and answered objections rising from the failure of the majority of Jews to believe the gospel. He has unfolded practical applications of this theology in such areas as yielding our minds to Jesus Christ, a proper evaluation of ourselves and others, matters of church and state, how believers are to live in light of the imminent return of Christ, and the need for Christians to accept and value one another.

With Romans 15:14, Paul begins to wrap this up, turning in his final paragraphs to his reasons for writing the letter, suggesting what his future travel plans might be, and sending greetings to people he knew in Rome. But even though he is ending, he still has quite a bit to say.

How does this last section fit in? We can understand the outline of Romans best if we think of it as a doctrinal treatise wrapped up in a letter. The letter began with the first seventeen verses of chapter 1. Everything since has been Paul's treatise. But here, in verse 14 of chapter 15, Paul resumes the letter format and actually harks back to

some of the things he wrote about in chapter 1. The words "my brothers" (Rom. 15:14) show that he is speaking personally now and from a concerned Christian heart.

Those Roman Christians

Paul tells the Roman Christians in the opening sentence of his personal remarks that they are doing all right and that he is convinced this is so. The full text says, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." Paul said something along these lines in the first chapter when he took note of their strong faith and of the fact that it was being talked about all over the world (v. 8).

He is renewing his comments along these lines because he had been developing his doctrinal arguments fully and forcefully—the next verse acknowledges that he had written "quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again"—and he knew that they might think that he somehow considers them to be deficient.

Of course, the fact that he has written as he has, far from being a thoughtless slight or criticism, is actually a compliment. Nothing is clearer than that the letter is for people who take their faith seriously. Yet it is not the mere fact of the letter that is a compliment. Paul is aware that his confidence in these believers, whom he had never seen, might nevertheless be misunderstood. So he compliments them directly, using the terms appearing in this verse: (1) "full of goodness," (2) "complete in knowledge," and (3) "competent to instruct one another. "John Murray says of this verse, "He could scarcely have devised a combination of words that would more effectively convey to them his own personal conviction of the fruit of the gospel in their midst."

If this really is Paul's way of complimenting the Roman church on being what a church should be, then he is also giving us three criteria by which we can evaluate ourselves—or any local gathering of believers.

Full of Goodness

Paul begins with *goodness,* and he says that this is something of which the Roman church was full. This is a rather rare word, not found in classical Greek but used in the Septuagint, elsewhere in Paul's writings, and by some later church writers, no doubt because of its use by Paul. The word is *agathôsunê*, and it is significant because it refers to moral or ethical goodness as well as to what we would most naturally think of —namely, kindness, thoughtfulness, charity toward the poor, and such.

This is important, of course, especially when we remember what Paul had to say about goodness in the earlier chapters. In his study of the nature of fallen man developed in chapter 3 he quoted
Psalm 14:1-3 and 53:1-3 as teaching that "there is no one who does good, not even one" (v. 12).

Even worse, not only do we fail to do or practice good; we also actively do evil, and that continuously.

> *"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."*
> *"The poison of vipers is on their lips."*
> *"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."*
> *"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,*
> *and the way of peace they do not know."*
> *"There is no fear of God before their eyes."*
>
> *Romans 3:13-18*

How, then, can Paul speak in chapter 15 of the Roman believers being filled with goodness? The answer, obviously, is that they had become Christians, having been turned from their sin to faith and righteousness by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is true, as Robert Haldane writes, that "in our flesh there is nothing good." But it is equally true that "from the work of the Spirit on our hearts we may be full of goodness." This is to be a normal condition. It is not a matter for some superclass of Christians, what some branches of the church call saints.

We need to remember that Galatians 5:22-23 lists goodness as one part of the Holy Spirit's fruit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,"

and that, according to Ephesians 2:10, doing good works is the necessary outcome of our having become Christians: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." If we do not show any evidence of God's goodness in our lives or if we do not do any good works, it is evidence that we are not Christians. So goodness is a check-off point not only for a good church, but for whether we are genuine followers of Jesus Christ.

Let me illustrate what we should be with this example. Less than two hours before I wrote this paragraph I received word that one of the leading members of our church had died. His name was Cornelius Phillips, and he had blessed many people because of his faith, strong testimony, and good works. When I heard of his death I immediately pulled out a letter that a man I did not even know had written about him a year and a half earlier. It read:

I'm writing regarding one of your church members at Tenth Presbyterian Church. He's in the hospital now, and I'm sure the folks at church are praying for him. What I wanted to say was that he is a fine Christian. He cares about the Lord; he cares about his family, and also about his church.

I met Cornelius Phillips last August when my father was ill and passed away. He lent a great deal of peace and caring to our family at that time and still does today.... Your church has a good reputation, and I would have to say that people like Cornelius and his wife and others like them are part of the reason for that reputation. Cornelius in his humility would be the first to say,
"Praise the Lord." I would echo that statement and say, "Praise the Lord" for people like him.

That is genuine Christianity. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be part of a church filled with such people? I dare to say I am part of such a church and that there are many like them. I would say of them, as Paul said of the Roman congregation, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness."

Yet we must not presume along these lines. We must constantly be asking, Am I such a person as Paul describes here? Am I filled with God's goodness? Would anybody ever use Paul's words to describe me? If we cannot answer yes to those questions, it is time for self-examination and for doing what Peter had in mind when he wrote, almost immediately after having spoken of the need for goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love among Christians, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

Complete in Knowledge

The second check-off point for a good church is the phrase "complete in knowledge." This does not mean learned in an academic sense but rather a sound, practical understanding of the Christian faith that will issue in wholesome, helpful conduct.

At this my mind goes back to our studies of Romans 12:1-2, especially the part where Paul urges us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. I made the link between thinking like a Christian and acting like a Christian. I said that you will never act like a Christian unless you begin to think properly. That is what is wrong with American religion, of course. Pollster George Gallup has described America as richly religious but ethically impoverished. In an interview with *Reformed Theological Seminary Journal* he said:

Religious belief is remarkably high—certainly, the highest of any developed nation in the world. At the same time, American religious life is characterized by a series of gaps. First, an "ethics gap" exists between Americans' expressed beliefs and the state of the society they shape. While religion is highly popular in America, it is to a large extent superficial; it does not change peoples' lives to the degree one would expect from their level of professed faith. In ethical behavior, there is very little difference between the churched and the unchurched.

The problem is found in the second gap Gallup mentions, a gap between faith and knowledge. "Related to this is a 'knowledge gap' between Americans' stated faith and the lack of the most basic knowledge about that faith. Half of those who say they are Christians do not know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount," Gallup says.

We would like to think this is a problem only for nominal Christians or perhaps, speaking as evangelicals, for liberals. After all, liberals do not even believe the Bible, we think. But it is a problem for us too.

Some time ago I read a book by David Wells, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary professor of historical and systematic theology, called *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*. Wells has a simple but very disturbing thesis: Evangelicalism as a religious force in American life is dead or is in the process of dying because it has abandoned any serious commitment to truth. He is not saying that evangelicalism is dead as a sociological force or presence, for evangelicals have large churches, many members, and a great deal of money. But since they no longer really care about the truthfulness of the gospel and the Christian faith as a whole, they are ceasing to make any significant difference.

I can hear many questioning that. It is the evangelicals, rather than liberals, who believe the gospel, they say.

Well, there is a great deal of difference between what we say we believe or even think we believe and what we believe practically. To judge by what evangelicals do rather than by what they say, which is what Professor Wells is attempting, evangelicals actually believe in Madison Avenue techniques or miracles for evangelism, psychology for Christian growth and sanctification, spiritual voodoo for discerning the will or God, and the power of politics, wealth, or numbers for making an impact on society. This is not what the followers of Christ did in an earlier age, when they proclaimed and trusted in the truth of the gospel.

What is happening to evangelicals is what happened to the liberal church earlier in this century, though most evangelicals are unaware of

it. They are losing faith in the power of the truth of God, blessed by the Spirit of God, to make a difference. They are in fact becoming quite worldly. It can hardly be said of most of today's evangelical churches that they are "complete in knowledge," meaning a sound and significant knowledge of the truth of God's revelation, even though they may be proficient in launching and developing churches.

Sadly, if this comparison holds, the prognosis for the future of the evangelical church is prefigured by the history of the liberal denominations that once had plenty of members and money but have been losing both quite rapidly.

Churches will lose their significance, too. In order to influence society, a person or a movement must be different. But Christians will never be different unless they understand, believe, and act upon the revelation of the character and ways of God that we have in the Bible. A while ago I asked the faculty at Gordon-Conwell Seminary what changes they had noticed in seminary students in recent years.

David Wells was present at this gathering, and he replied that he had noticed four things. First, each entering class was more biblically illiterate than the last. Second, each class seemed to be filled with more individuals who were swamped with their own personal problems and thus were thinking mostly about themselves rather than about their studies or how they might help others. Third, they had a greater sense of their own personal rights or entitlements; they expected everything to be done for them. And fourth, they were sold out to and mostly uncritical of the surrounding secular culture.

I find that frightening, now and with a glance to the future. Can it be said of us that we are "complete in knowledge"? We should be. The church in Rome was. What is going to happen to us if we are not?

Competent to Instruct One Another

Finally, Paul says in praise of the Roman church that the believers in Rome were "competent to instruct one another." The Greek word

translated *competent* is based on the word *dynamis* (actually *dynamenoi*), which has the idea of being powerful or effective. *Dynamis* was the word used in the phrase "by the *power* of the Holy Spirit" in verse 13. *Instruct* is *nouthetein*, which carries the idea of admonishing another person in order to correct something that may be wrong. In the New Testament the word occurs only in Paul's writings plus once in a speech of his recorded in Acts 20:31.

In Acts 20 Paul has arrived at Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor near Ephesus and has sent for the elders of the Ephesian church in order to say good-bye to them and give them his final admonitions and encouragements. As part of this helpful instruction he brings forward his own example when he was with them earlier, saying, "Remember that for three years I never stopped *warning* each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31).

He constantly had the health and well-being of the Ephesian church in view and always did everything possible to build it up. Thus, he was always speaking to them about God and the gospel and encouraging them to go forward steadily and boldly in the Christian life.

Do we love the Lord enough to talk about him naturally and often? Do we love others enough to bring spiritual truths into daily conversation? Do we care for Christians enough to point them in the right direction when we see that they are deviating from or falling short of it?

And do we sometimes talk about difficult things, though kindly? Once Donald Grey Barnhouse was sent an appraisal of a man who was under care of the church's session as a candidate for the ministry. It had been prepared by a mature Christian under whom the candidate had worked and was, as Barnhouse said, "a dissection of his spiritual anatomy." Barnhouse met with the candidate and started to review the appraisal with him. He had hardly gotten beyond the first paragraph of the four-page document before the young man reacted strongly. Barnhouse told him to jot down his disagreements while the letter was being read and

they would discuss them, which they did. It was easy to see that he was deeply agitated and wounded.

When Barnhouse finished, the man demanded, "Do you agree with this?"

Barnhouse did not reply to that question, but he said, "I do not know when I have ever read a paper that more clearly reveals a heart of love in the man who prepared it. If I were to write a title, I would call it, 'How to Salvage John Jones for the Lord Jesus Christ.'"

That is what the apostle Paul was doing in Ephesus and what he was complimenting the Roman believers as being able to do with one another, not to tear them down or expose each other's faults, but with the goal of training them and encouraging them for the work of Jesus Christ.

If these things can be said of us, thank God. We are not capable of developing these things in ourselves. They are his work. If they cannot be said of us, then they are goals that we can work for: (1) that we might be full of goodness, (2) that we might be complete in knowledge, and (3) that we might be competent to instruct one another. At that point we will have begun to be a mature church, having attained "to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Chapter 225.
Paul's Priestly Ministry

Romans 15:15-16

Christianity has only one priest, Jesus Christ. He alone has made atonement for our sins by his death on the cross, and he alone makes intercession for us before the Father. That is why the church's preachers, pastors, or ministers are never called priests in the New Testament.

In light of this we find something very striking in our text. Here Paul is writing of his ministry to the Gentiles, a ministry given to him by Jesus

Christ, and he speaks of his "*priestly* duty." This is striking because the words are not used in that way elsewhere and also because in other places Paul explicitly disclaims interest in what are usually thought of as normal ministerial functions. An example is baptism. He told the Corinthians he did not baptize often and that he was glad he had only baptized a few persons in their city (1 Cor. 1:14-17).

He is making a contrast between what priests are normally thought of as doing and what he was actually called to do as minister to the Gentiles. Priests stand between men and God and offer sacrifices. The priestly duty to which Paul refers is to proclaim the gospel.

The Curse of Priestcraft

It has been a misfortune for the church that its ministers ever got the idea that they were anything else but preachers.

What happened in church history is something like what occurred in Israel in regard to the people's wanting a king. In the early days of Israel's history, after the conquest of Canaan, the land was ruled by judges whom God raised up when leadership was required. But the people began to look around at the other nations who had kings, and they decided they wanted one too. They approached Samuel, who was a judge at that time, and said to him, "Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (1 Sam. 8:5). This idea displeased Samuel, but the Lord agreed to their request, and headstrong Saul became the first of many wayward and even oppressive kings of Israel.

Not content with the role God had given them to teach and so guide the church and its ministry, ministers in the early church looked around at the nearby pagan religions, which had priests, and decided that they wanted to be priests too. So they began to wear special clerical clothes and lord it over the laity. What is worse, they began to think of the communion table as an altar and the observance of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice in which the body and blood of Jesus were to be repeatedly offered up for sins. From this terrible error came the mass.

Moreover, the clergy taught that they were necessary for the offering to be rightly made and thus that salvation was impossible for anyone without their priestly mediation. The heresy of sacramental salvation was the sad result.

Robert Haldane wrote, "The bread of the Lord's table at length became the body of Christ in a literal sense; the table on which it lay became the altar; the teachers became the priests who offered the sacrifice of the mass; and the contributions of Christians became offerings. In all these things, and innumerable others, the figurative sense has been, by a gross imagination and the artifice of Satan, turned into a literal sense, to the utter subversion of truth."

What a difference between this and what Paul says of his priestly ministry in our passage. Charles Hodge described the contrast this way: "In this beautiful passage we see the nature of the only priesthood which belongs to the Christian ministry. It is not their office to make atonement for sin, or to offer a propitiatory sacrifice to God, but by the preaching of the gospel to bring men, by the influence of the Holy Spirit, to offer themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

The Nature of the Ministry

These verses teach that the nature of the Christian ministry is to proclaim the gospel.

The purpose of a court trial is to learn the truth and deal with its consequences. Therefore, witnesses are required to promise to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But since it is often difficult to get at the truth, there are such things as physical evidence, depositions, testimony by experts, and cross examinations. The task of the minister is likewise to proclaim "the gospel, the whole gospel, and nothing but the gospel." But so many other things get in the way and obscure the gospel or its proclamation that in many cases this essential task of teaching is just not done.

Let's follow the outline suggested by the swearing in of trial witnesses and talk about "the gospel, the whole gospel, and nothing but the gospel."

1. *The gospel.* The gospel is good news, which is what the Greek word *euangelion* means. Nothing should be easier to proclaim than that, we think. But let's ask a few questions. First, what is the nature of this good news? Answer: that God has provided a way for us to be saved from sin through the work of Jesus Christ. Now let's explore that: What is sin? The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers this way: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." What, then, is the law of God? To answer that question we have to explore the meaning of the Ten Commandments, which is what Jesus seems to have done with the rich young man who came to him, asking, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17), and who later went away sorrowful.

This is also what Paul has done in Romans. He has explored the nature and extent of sin in great detail so we might be able to understand the nature of God's saving grace toward us in Jesus Christ.

The point is that although the gospel is a simple thing, explaining it takes time. But this is what many of today's churches, even evangelical churches, fail to do. It is why David Wells talks about the death of evangelicalism in America in *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology."* Our churches may appear prosperous on the surface, but thousands of them are dead or dying because in a practical sense they have abandoned truth.

2. *The whole gospel.* Paul also made it his aim to preach the whole gospel. This is very important. I have pointed out that the nature of the gospel is often missed because we do not deal with such underlying matters as sin as defined by God's law. But even when we have done that and have gone on to speak of the work of Christ in saving us from God's just punishment for our sin, we still have not explained the whole gospel. For the good news is not just that

God has made a way for us to be saved from sin's penalty but that God is also saving us from practicing sin.

In other words, sanctification is part of what is going on in salvation. Sanctification is not justification. Justification is an act; sanctification is a process. They must be distinguished, but they cannot be separated—you cannot have one without the other. Therefore, if a person claims to be saved but is not going on in the Christian life, that claim, however sincerely stated, is presumption. Jesus said that we must take up our cross daily and follow him (Luke 9:23). He said, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matt. 10:22). According to the Bible, Jesus died to save *us from* our sin, not *in* it.

This too is what Paul has been teaching in Romans. And not just that. He has taught a Christian view of history and the need to apply the whole of the gospel to the whole of life, which is what chapters 12-16 are about. When we begin to think along these lines, we soon discover that "the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God" is not easy.

3. *Nothing but the gospel.* There is more than one way to tell a lie, and one way is to tell the truth but add to it falsely. The same thing is true of the gospel. The great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis remarked that the greatest heresies in the church have not been the denials of Christian truth so much as they have been additions to it, what Lewis called "Christ and...": Christ *and* Buddha, faith *and* works, grace *and* merit, Christianity *and* secularism, and so forth.

In the letter to the Galatians Paul was dealing with people who wanted to add the keeping of the law to faith as a way of justification. He said that if they did that, Christ would be of "no value" to them at all (Gal. 5:2). He said that if anyone preached a gospel of "Jesus and...," this would be another gospel—a false gospel—and that he should be condemned.

The positive expression of what Paul was doing appears in his words to the believers at Corinth:

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I

resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1). This does not mean that Paul only preached so-called salvation messages or that he failed to relate his teaching to what the Corinthians were dealing with as part of their culture. But he did not attempt to add to Christ's work. He preached Christ and Christ only.

Tact and Boldness

There is an amazing balance in what Paul is doing here between what we would call tact and what he calls boldness. Having stated the gospel fully and applied it forcefully, especially in urging the so-called strong Christians to bear with those they considered to be weaker and urging the weaker Christians not to condemn the strong, Paul apparently sensed that the Roman believers might be offended by his frankness. So he acknowledges that he has written "quite boldly on some points," possibly in an offensive manner, yet tactfully, too. For he not only admits his boldness but explains it in the context of merely reminding the Roman Christians of what they probably already knew.

We learn from this that although it is important to preach "the gospel, the whole gospel, and nothing but the gospel," it is not necessary to do it offensively. We should always be respectful of the people to whom we speak or write.

We also learn from this passage that we need to be reminded of these core doctrines. If Paul is serious about reminding these believers at Rome, then they were already well instructed.

Nevertheless, they still needed reminding, as we all do because we tend to forget God's truth or at least neglect it and let it slide away from our active minds. We always need to stir one another up to remembrance (2 Peter 1:12-15).

The Goal of the Ministry

It's important to note in this text how Paul writes about the goal of his ministry. We hear a great deal about goal-setting these days: Companies

set goals, individuals set goals, and even churches spend time analyzing the precise nature of their work and state objectives and goals. Paul's goal is this: "so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

Paul is not making a formal argument at this point. He does not give us an Old Testament quotation to nail his point down, as he has done many times before. But I suspect, because of his use of the language of sacrifice, that he has Isaiah 66:20 in mind. Isaiah was writing about those who "will proclaim [God's] glory among the nations" (*proclaim* is the very word Paul uses), and he concludes, "They will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord."

That is what Paul says God has called him to do: to proclaim the gospel "so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

Gentiles were considered to be unclean by Jews, but, according to Paul, they are to become an offering sanctified to God by the Holy Spirit. The word *sanctified* means to be set apart to God and dedicated or consecrated to him. Paul said this of them at the very beginning of the letter: "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Rom. 1:7). How are people sanctified? The first way is simply by their becoming Christians, for all who become Christians also become saints, since Christians are by definition people set apart for God. It is because of this that Paul can write inclusively of the saints at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), the saints throughout Achaia (2 Cor. 1:1), the saints in Ephesus (Eph. 1:1), and so on.

The second way is by their offering their bodies to God "as living sacrifices," which is what Paul urged at the start of this final section of the letter (see Rom. 12:1). Either meaning would fit the context here. But we sense, just because this is the practical portion of the book, that what he has in mind is a dedicated, effective, hardworking, God-glorifying Gentile Christian church.

The Sufficiency of the Word of God

How is all of this to happen? How are the Gentiles (or Jews, or anyone else for that matter) going to become an offering that is acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit? By proclaiming the gospel.

Do we really believe that God has given us what we need in the Bible, or do we think we have to supplement it with other man-made things? Do we need sociological techniques to do evangelism; psychology, psychiatry, and counseling for Christian growth; extrabiblical signs or miracles for guidance; and political tools for achieving social progress and reform? To judge from their programs, this is exactly what many evangelicals and evangelical churches believe and are practicing. But it is precisely why they are so weak and why "evangelical" religion is failing.

The Word of God is sufficient in all areas; it is able to do all we need it to do and are commissioned to do as Christians.

1. *Evangelism.* The Word of God is sufficient for evangelism. Indeed, it is the only thing that works in evangelism. Everything else—captivating music, personal testimonies, emotional appeals, even coming forward to make a commitment to Jesus Christ—all that is at best supplementary. And if it is used or depended upon apart from the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God, the "conversions" that result are spurious conversions, which is to say that those who respond do not actually become Christians. Worldly methods work, but the results will be worldly as well. The only way the Holy Spirit regenerates lost men and women is through the Bible. Peter said, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).

2. *Sanctification.* When evangelicals think of sanctification today, most of them think of either of two things: a method ("Here are four steps to sanctification; do this and you will be holy"), or an experience ("You need a second work of grace, a baptism of the Holy Spirit"). Paul's approach was to teach Christians what has

been done for them by God in their salvation, because if they know that and understand it, then they will know that they cannot go back to being what they were before and they will get on with being Christians. The only rational thing for them to do will be to go forward in the Christian life.

3. *Guidance.* All the guidance we need in the Christian life has been provided in the Bible. It tells us how we are to live and what we are to do to please God. If there is something we want to know or think we need to know that is not in the Bible—what job we should take, whom we should marry, where we should live—there is a sense in which it doesn't matter as long as we are obeying what God teaches about living a godly life. This does not mean that God does not have a detailed plan for our lives. He does. But it does mean that we do not have to know this plan in advance. Indeed, we cannot know it. What we need to know is what God has told us in the Bible.

4. *Social reform.* We are concerned about social renewal and reform today and rightly so, because we live in a declining culture and want to see the lordship of Jesus acknowledged and justice and righteousness prevail. We want to see the poor relieved of suffering. We want to see broken relationships healed. What is needed is not more government programs or increased emphasis on social work, but first and above all the teaching and practice of the Word of God.

This is proved by what happened in Geneva, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century through the ministry of John Calvin. The city was a moral disgrace. It was notorious for its riots, gambling, indecent dancing, drunkenness, adultery, and other vices. People would run around the streets naked, singing bawdy songs and blaspheming God. The governing council of the city was distressed and passed laws designed to restrain vice and remedy the situation, but nothing worked. Public morals continued to decline.

Calvin came to Geneva in August 1536, was dismissed two and a half years later, and was recalled in 1541. He had no money, no influence, and no weapon but the Word of God. But he preached from the Bible every day, and as he did, under the power of his preaching, the city began to change. As the Genevan people acquired knowledge of God's Word and allowed it to influence their behavior, their city became a model city from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, Great Britain, and the New World. Geneva was cleaned up physically. Beggars were removed from the streets, but a hospital and poorhouse were provided for them, and they were well run. Education was offered for all classes of people, poor as well as rich, and new industries flourished. There has probably never been a better example of extensive moral and social reform than the transformation of Geneva under John Calvin, and it was accomplished almost entirely by the preaching of God's Word.

The reason, of course, is that the Bible truly is the Word of God and thus carries with it the power and compelling authority of God himself. And that is why Paul made it his business to proclaim the gospel, and why we should too. What God does today he does by his Word. Therefore, it is our priestly duty to proclaim it to a needy world.

Chapter 226.
Paul's Glory

Romans 15:17-22

I do not know how old Paul was when he wrote his letter to the Romans, but to judge from what we are told about him in Acts he must have been coming to the end of both his life and his ministry. Shortly after writing Romans he took his final journey to Jerusalem, was arrested, and was sent as a prisoner to Rome, where eventually he died.

Paul may have had an extensive ministry in Spain after he first came to Rome, after a release from an initial imprisonment. But whether that was the case or not, in this passage of Romans Paul seems to be looking

back over the greater part of his lifetime career as a missionary and evaluating it from a spiritual perspective. We know from his letters to the Corinthians that his career had been difficult. He had experienced hardships, threats, beatings, dangers, and rejections (see 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:8-12, 6:3-10, 11:23-29). But he did not judge what he had done to be a failure. On the contrary, in these verses he actually boasts about what God had accomplished through him "in leading the Gentiles to obey God" (v. 18). He uses the words *glory* in verse 17 ("I glory in Christ Jesus") and *ambition* in verse 20 ("It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known").

Glorying in Jesus Only

At first glance this seems prideful, and we have been taught that pride in any form is wrong. Yet it is not as simple as that. There is sinful pride, but there is also a proper kind of pride, not in what we are or have done by ourselves naturally, but as Christian people who are pleased with what God does through us. This can get distorted and destructive because of sin, but a right kind of pride is helpful—and even necessary—if it is focused properly. Paul had the right kind of pride because he was boasting in Christ and not in his own personal accomplishments or talents.

There was a time in his life when Paul had gloried in his accomplishments, but that was before he met Christ. He wrote about it in Philippians: "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:4-6). That was an impressive list of assets from a human point of view. But when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus he learned that these worldly accomplishments did not add up to righteousness before God. They could not earn God's approval. Moreover, his pride in them had been keeping him from faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

When Paul saw what he had been doing he wrote those things off as mere garbage, choosing to trust Jesus Christ alone. He told the Philippians, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:7-8).

Paul did not glory in his natural abilities, either. We know that he had a powerful intellect. The Book of Romans and his other writings are ample proof of that. We know that he could speak persuasively. His speeches preserved in Acts give an idea of how tactful, wise, informed, adaptive, and persuasive his speech was. He was the equal of any Greek orator. In fact, he was superior to them, because he believed what he was saying.

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, "Paul's greatest talent was his ability to enter a completely pagan city which practiced devil worship and gather a group of transformed believers in the name of Christ. He then hovered over them in prayer and, by constant admonition, lifted them from the most corrupt stratum of heathenism to the highest level of Christian godliness and morality." That was a tremendous achievement based on great talent. It could be said that in time the gospel seeds Paul sowed overthrew the Roman Empire and transformed the European continent. But Paul did not glory in his talents any more than in his amazing accomplishments.

Instead, he gloried in Jesus Christ. He told the Corinthians, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Paul would have loved to sing this hymn by John Bowring:

In the cross of Christ I glory,

Towering ov'r the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story Gathers round its head sublime.

Yet Paul also gloried in what Christ had done through him. The most glorious thing of all is that Jesus was able to accomplish these things through such a person as Paul. The wonder is that he could take this proud, stubborn, self-righteous murderer of God's people and turn him into the greatest pioneer missionary the world has ever seen. Paul could never take that glory to himself. Yet the more he was able to accomplish, the greater was the glory that went to Christ.

God's Use of Little Things

That should be true of you and me too, which is where this study becomes practical. Earlier I mentioned Paul's claim that he had not depended on wisdom or eloquence when he preached the gospel to the Corinthians, though he had plenty of both, because he did not want the Corinthians' faith to rest on human abilities but on the power of God. He said nearly the same thing in regard to their own mostly undistinguished backgrounds and abilities, as if to point out that it was precisely through their limitations that God was to be most glorified:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things —and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

God is glorified in using us. We are the most unprofitable of servants, even if we have great natural talents. But if we will offer ourselves to

God as his slaves, he will use us and will bring glory to himself even through our natural human foolishness, our weaknesses, or our lack of worldly status. And that will be our glory too!

Think of the Reformers, and what God did through them. Luther was a portly little monk. Calvin was what we would call an ivory tower bookworm and theologian. God changed the world through those men. He used another little monk, known as "Little Bilney," to win Hugh Latimer to Christ, and Latimer had a tremendous Reformation influence. William Wilberforce was a cripple, but God used him to free the slaves throughout the British empire. D. L. Moody was only an uneducated shoe salesmen, but one day Moody heard a preacher say, "The world has yet to see what God can do through one man who is entirely surrendered to him." In his heart Moody said, "By God's grace I will be that man."

That is what is required, and it is what Paul did. It is what made him such a powerful ambassador for Christ in the ancient Greek and Roman world.

What Paul Accomplished

In verses 18-20 Paul tells what he accomplished at Christ's direction, by his power, and for his glory. It is not what Jesus is doing with you necessarily. It is personal to Paul. But it is impressive and is a suggestion of what God might be able to do through you, if you truly give your life to him. There are a number of specific points to notice.

1. *The scope of Paul's evangelistic work.* In verse 19 Paul describes the scope of his work, writing, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." Students of Paul's letter have pointed to a problem at this point, but looking into it only gives us greater insight into Paul's accomplishment. The problem is that, so far as we know, Paul did not do evangelistic work in Jerusalem, though he visited it on several occasions, and he did not evangelize Illyricum. Illyricum

refers to the region we know as the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Dalmatia) and Albania.

The solution seems to be that Paul is saying not that he evangelized these areas, but that he evangelized from one to the other. It would be as if someone said that he had traveled all over the United States from Canada to Mexico. He would not be saying that he had traveled in either Canada or Mexico but throughout the land in between.

In other words, Paul had evangelized Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece, as described in Acts. He started out in the Near East and pushed on north and west as quickly as he could to establish sound churches in each region. He was obeying the Great Commission as he had received it from Jesus Christ. It was in the furtherance of this goal that he was planning to visit Rome and, if possible, the regions beyond.

The Great Commission was not given only to Paul, of course, but to us. What are you doing to further it, personally or by helping others to go where you cannot?

2. *The nature of Paul's evangelistic work.* In verse 20 Paul gives a glimpse into the unique nature of his work, which was "to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I should not be building on someone else's foundation." He supports this in verse 21 by quoting from Isaiah:

Rather, as it is written:

> "Those who were not told about him will see and those who have not heard will understand."

This is not every Christian's calling, nor every minister's. Some are called to build on foundations already laid. Paul pointed that out in 1 Corinthians, where he compared the differing ministries of himself and Apollos, saying, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow" (1 Cor. 3:6). My own ministry has had some pioneering elements, but it has consisted largely in watering what others have

planted or building on foundations that have been previously laid. My challenge is to build well on what has preceded me.

At the same time, we need to remember that Paul's ambition has been an important stimulus and challenge to many missionaries who have made it their ambition to take the gospel to new areas. I have friends who want to get into remote areas of the former Soviet Union so that Christ may be preached there to those who do not know him. Others want to reach far into China, and some are doing so. Still others are learning the language of remote jungle tribes so that they can translate the Bible into those languages. That is the ambition Paul had. So even though we may not all be called to do it—real pioneers are usually few in number—we should nevertheless support their efforts whenever possible.

I am reminded of David Livingstone's reply when he was presenting himself to the London Missionary Society and they asked him where he wanted to go. He answered, "Anywhere, as long as it is forward." After he reached Africa he recorded his impressions, saying that he was haunted by the smoke of a thousand villages stretching off into the distance. How can any true Christian be at ease in Zion when there are billions of people who have yet to hear of Jesus Christ?

3. *The power of Paul's evangelistic work.* In verse 19 Paul stated that his missionary work was carried out "by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit." According to nearly all commentators, "signs and miracles" is not the best translation of Paul's words. Signs *are* miracles. So the contrast is not between signs and miracles but between two different ways of looking at what is miraculous. The right idea is conveyed by "signs and wonders." In biblical language a sign is a miracle that has significance through pointing beyond itself to truth about God or the gospel. All Jesus' miracles recorded in John are signs in this sense. A wonder is the same event regarded from the point of view of the awe it evokes in a human observer.

There is a fairly popular movement today that claims that doing miracles is the proper and perhaps only truly effective way to do evangelism. It is called the signs and wonders movement, and it is associated with the name of John Wimber, a former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and the Vineyard churches that he founded.

Paul only used these words in two other places: 2 Corinthians 12:12, where he used them of himself, calling miracles "the things that mark an apostle"; and 2 Thessalonians 2:9, where they have to do with the work of "the lawless one" who is the Antichrist. These passages teach two important things. First, in themselves signs and wonders prove nothing, for they can be done by demonic powers as well as by God. Second, in the New Testament miracles are associated with apostles ("things that mark an apostle") and were therefore meant to authenticate the apostolic message in days before there was a New Testament. Today the New Testament is our apostolic authority.

That doesn't mean that God never does miracles today but that we are not to seek miracles as a way of doing evangelism. All this does is get us away from doing what is really important and effective—teaching the Bible as the Word of God.

Moreover, it is the teaching of the Bible that alone accomplishes the true miracles God and we desire. The miracles that need to be done today are not healing the sick or raising the dead, but bringing dead souls to life to believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and then to be changed by him. Someone once asked a preacher whether he could turn water into wine as Jesus did. He answered that he could do something better than that. He told about an alcoholic who had neglected his family but who had been brought to Christ by hearing the gospel. The preacher said, "We didn't turn water into wine, but we turned whisky into milk for his babies."

So it has always been. As Christ's people have taken the gospel to the farthest reaches of the world, pagans living in darkest spiritual night have been brought to gospel day, the despairing have been given a sure and lasting hope, liars have been turned into men and women of truth,

people of loose morals have become righteous and upright, and those who have been lazy with no real goals in life have been captured for Jesus and have lived industrious lives for his glory. This has fulfilled Jesus' words when he said, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).

If even the angels in heaven rejoice whenever a sinner comes to Christ (Luke 15:10), should it not be our goal and glory to work faithfully and industriously to see it happen too?

To God Alone Be Glory

I close by reminding you that although the conversion of the lost is our glory to the extent that we participate by carrying the gospel to them, it is ours only because it is Jesus Christ's first of all, because he is at work within us. Paul said, "I glory *in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 15:17).

Remember that great scene in Revelation 4:10-11 where the saints lay their crowns before the throne and say:

> "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive
> glory and honor and power,
> for you created all things, and by your will they
> were created and have their being."

The saints have crowns because of what they have achieved. They have been faithful to Christ, they have fought the good fight, they have triumphed by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony. That is their glory. But they do not take that glory to themselves. Rather, like Paul, they give it back to God by laying their crowns at his feet.

One day you and I will have a chance to do it too. God grant that what we give him in that day might be bright and glorious, to the praise of his amazing grace.

Chapter 227.

Onward to Spain!

Romans 15:23-24

If a person works for the city or federal government, she might retire after twenty years of service. A man serving in the armed forces might also retire after twenty years. In other work retirement is generally fixed by age. But what about retirement from Christian service or from merely being a Christian? I want to suggest that for a Christian retirement never comes, since we are to live as Christians and serve others until Jesus returns or we die.

David Brainard, the friend of Jonathan Edwards, died of tuberculosis at a young age. But even on his deathbed he rejoiced that he was still able to teach a young Indian boy how to read the Bible. Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of my mentors, said that it was his intention to keep on working until God retired him permanently. And so he did. God took him to heaven shortly after he had completed his studies of the Book of Romans.

Paul had an impressive list of missionary accomplishments, sufficient for many lifetimes, but he had no intention of settling down into a comfortable retirement. Our text tells us that instead of stopping with what was past, Paul wanted to press on west from the site of his present endeavors in Greece to bring the gospel to far-distant Spain.

His attitude reminds us of David Livingstone's response to the London Missionary Society when they asked him where he wanted to go as a missionary: "Anywhere, as long as it is forward."

Forgetting What Is Behind

The passage in which Paul spells out his missionary plans and desires for the future begins at verse 23, but this is one of those places where Paul seems to break off what he is saying without finishing his sentence. The New International Version tries to smooth out the

difficulty by adding "I plan to do so" to verse 24, but those words are not in the original Greek text.

The striking thing about verse 23 is that it is a virtual repetition of what Paul said in Romans 1:13, which may be why he breaks off as he does: "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles." In chapter 15 he seems to be saying, "Since I have completed my work in these regions and since I have always wanted to visit you who are in Rome....

But you know that, because I have told you that already." What he says then is that although he had often wanted to spend some profitable time with them, he did not want to settle down in Rome permanently but wanted to make it only a stopping-off place on an anticipated fourth missionary journey to Spain.

Pressing On to What Is Before

Scholars do not agree on whether Paul ever got to Spain. Some read into the pastoral letters that Paul was imprisoned twice in Rome ("The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack," 2 Tim. 4:18). Then Paul could have gone to Spain after his first imprisonment, returned to Rome to report on his activities, and then been arrested again and martyred. Since we know that he was martyred in Rome, if he was imprisoned there only once, he obviously couldn't have gone to Spain.

The only evidence that shows that Paul might have been in Spain are two small non-Spanish records. Clement of Rome, one of the apostolic fathers, writes in *Epistle to the Corinthians* that Paul reached "the limits of the west." He does not use the word *Spain*, but "the limits of the west" would have meant Spain to a Roman, which Clement was. The other record is the Muratorian Canon, which mentions "the departure of Paul from the city on his journey to Spain." These are interesting references, but they fall short of proof.

Regardless of whether Paul actually made it to Spain, we can learn from his plans to go there. Ray Stedman makes several valuable points about these verses:

1. *A place for planning.* Some Christians act as if believers should sail through life on automatic pilot, expecting God to direct their lives in a supernatural way apart from any direct involvement from them. They think planning is wrong. But, of course, Paul did not think like that. He was open to God's special guidance, as we learn from the accounts of his missionary journeys in Acts. He obeyed God's leading. But he also made plans, and one of those plans, which was quite important in his thinking, was to carry the gospel to the far corners of the known Roman world— to Spain. Paul had planned to go to Spain for some time, and he was still pursuing this goal at the time of his writing to the Romans.

2. *The need for flexibility in planning.* Although Paul made plans he was also flexible in the sense that he did not have a timetable. Stedman says that "he went according to the way God opened the doors." He planned to go in a certain direction. He kept that clearly in his mind, but "he did not tell God how or when it had to be." Paul subordinated his plans to God's overall direction, and he did not chafe when the specifics of God's plan or God's timing varied from his own.

3. *The importance of persistence.* Paul did not abandon his plans when they were delayed by God but instead persisted in them. Stedman writes, "He had set his heart on Rome and Spain, and he was going there. No matter how long it took, he kept plodding steadily toward the goal." We do not know if he ever got there, but the evangelization of Spain remained his heart's desire.

Someone will ask if, in that case, it might not have been wrong for Paul to have made plans to reach that country since, if he did not get there, God obviously did not intend for him to do so. It would mean that Paul's plans were not God's plans, that Paul was in error. Well, if Paul did not get to Spain, it obviously was not God's plan for him to reach

Spain. But I do not think it follows that he was wrong to have made this an important missionary goal. If that were the case, it would be wrong for us to plan anything since, as Robert Burns once wrote, "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft aglee." Our plans frequently fail. I know people who have planned to go to the far reaches of the former Soviet Union but have not been able to get there, at least not yet. I do not believe it is wrong for them to have made those plans. It is better to dream great dreams for God, even if they are not fully realized, than to dream no dreams at all. One thing is certain, unless we see visions, dream dreams, and make plans, there will be no great steps forward in the work of the gospel.

Help on the Outward Journey

Ray Stedman adds another point to what he said about Paul's planning: In his missionary work Paul always tried to work with a team, never alone. We know from the pastoral letters that by the time he reached Rome most of his pioneer team had been left behind—Timothy in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5). At one point of his imprisonment only Luke was with
Paul (2 Tim. 4:11), but even then he wrote to Timothy to urge him to come to Rome and to bring Mark with him. Here in his letter to the Romans he seems to be recruiting the members of this important church to be what we would call a home support team.

How tactfully he does it. First he tells them that he is only going to be passing through. He wants to be able to enjoy their company for a while, but he is not going to stay with them at their expense or take charge of the Roman church. His sights were focused elsewhere.

Second, he wants them to assist him on his journey. The Greek lexicographers tell us that *assist* (literally, "*being brought forward* on my journey by you") is a verb that can be used of a variety of helps, such as food, money, companions, arranging for means of travel, and other matters. The verb could be restricted to items of common courtesy, like prayers and best wishes, but it also allows for more substantial help, which Paul would need and for which he is very gently

hinting. Up to this point he had been supported by his home church at Antioch in Syria, but Spain would be too far away for him to receive any tangible help from Syria. Therefore, he is suggesting that it would be a great help to him and an encouragement if the Roman church could become his new home base and back him as he presses on westward to the Iberian peninsula.

Some Applications for Us

This passage is bursting with valuable applications.

1. *Our missionary task is not ended until every person in the world has heard of Jesus Christ.* It is easy to get tired in Christian work not only as individuals, but as churches. When we are tired it is easy to think of retirement, dropping out of Christian work. That is not right. If God has left us in this life, it is for us to do something good for him. Otherwise he would simply take us home to glory. And if Jesus has not yet returned, it is because there are people who need to be reached with the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. As long as the church is in the world, we have people to reach and neither your task nor mine is completed.

We sometimes sing, "Arise, O God, and shine in all thy saving might, and prosper each design to spread thy glorious light." But we would be more on target today if we cried, "Arise, O church of God, fulfill God's design." Christians are asleep in the world's soft, embracing arms. They need a trumpet call to missions. They need to be told that the gospel task is not ended until every person in the world has heard of Jesus Christ.

2. *"When an opportunity of serving Christ in one direction is shut up, we ought to turn to another."* I can't think of any better way to state this application than the way the Scottish commentator Robert Haldane stated it in his commentary. We do not know why Paul thought that there was no more place for him to work in Asia, Macedonia, or Greece, perhaps only that he felt he had established churches in the key cities and that this was his particular calling

from God. But whatever the reason, the closing of his work in one place merely freed him to begin to think of serving in another.

If you are serving God and your work is not done, keep at it where you are. Don't get restless. But if one opportunity has closed—perhaps the people in your Bible study have moved away or you are no longer serving in the Sunday school or on a church board—look around for something else. The needs are great and the opportunities are endless.

3. *A desire to serve God in some place is not unworthy, for God often works his will in us in such ways.* Some people have the idea that the only way we can be sure of doing God's will is if we are doing something we hate or at least would rather not be doing. What an absurdity that is! Look for what you can do and desire to do it. Paul told Timothy, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1), thereby endorsing a desire to serve God as an elder in a local church. This does not mean that your desire will necessarily prove to have been God's will for you. We do not know whether Paul ever got to Spain. But it does mean that the desire itself is not a bad thing. It is certainly unlikely that you will achieve anything for God if you do not aspire to it.

4. *Although the task remains unchanged, God often accomplishes its fulfillment in ways we do not anticipate or desire.* We have to be flexible, for God's ways are not our ways, and he frequently accomplishes what we rightly desire for him in ways we could not have imagined. Who would have thought that God's way of making the Jewish people into a great nation would have been bringing them to Egypt in the days of Joseph and later allowing them to become slaves? Or who would have supposed that God's way of bringing Paul to Rome would have been through arrest in Jerusalem, followed by a two-year imprisonment at Caesarea, culminating in his appeal to be tried in Rome by Caesar?

God's ways are not our ways. Therefore, be prepared for new things and for unexpected circumstances. Although the task of taking the gospel to

the lost remains unchanged, God will probably accomplish your part of it in ways you do not anticipate.

5. *Although God could supply his missionaries' needs miraculously, he usually does so through the gifts of his people.* God is a God of miracles. Paul had not lagged behind the other apostles in being a channel through which God performed miracles (2 Cor. 12:12). God could have provided miraculously for Paul. But he did not. Instead, when Paul started out bringing the gospel to Asia Minor he was supported by the church at Antioch. Later when he went from Macedonia into Greece he was supported by the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:10-19). Here he tactfully looks for support from the church at Rome.

It is no different today. God calls his servants to the missionary task, but he also places a duty to support them on those who remain at home. That is your duty if you have a regular income and are not yourself serving on a foreign or other missionary field. Has God blessed you with material things? Are you provided for financially? Then remember your missionaries. Remember that although God could supply their needs miraculously, he has chosen to do so through you.

6. *The fellowship of the people of God is more to be desired than the friendship of emperors or kings.* Paul was going to Rome, the seat of the great Roman Empire, the home of the Caesars. But Paul was not looking to the great of the world to help him out, nor did he covet their friendship. His friends were the Christians, and he wanted to be with them and be helped on his missionary way by them. Learn from his example. The world will not help you do God's work. It will entice you, use you, betray you, let you down. Only God's people will share your godly desires and vision.

Informal Missionaries

When we study an extraordinary person like Paul it is very easy for us to dissociate his achievements from our own plans or expectations, just because we think of him as being so extraordinary. But although he was

certainly that, the vision Paul had and the things he accomplished were not really that extraordinary in these early formative years of Christianity. Paul's dreams were the same as those of the great majority of God's people.

In Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* we are told about the rapid expansion of Christianity in the first century of the Christian era. Tertullian, writing around the year A.D. 200, said, "We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you— cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods." How did that occur? Gibbon suggests that it was because in the early church "it became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received." In other words, each believer considered himself or herself to be a missionary. Adolf Harnack, the great German church historian, declared, "The most numerous and successful missionaries of the Christian religion were not the regular teachers but Christians themselves, in virtue of their loyalty and courage.... It was characteristic of this religion that everyone who seriously confessed the faith proved of service to its propaganda.... We cannot hesitate to believe that the great mission of Christianity was in reality accomplished by means of *informal missionaries*."

That is exactly what we need today. If you see this need, you will press on with the missionary task, because you will know that God has given you important things to do for him today.

Chapter 228.
Christian Giving

Romans 15:25-28

When the subject of charitable giving comes up, most people assume they are generous. They are not naturally that way, of course, since people are selfish by nature. It is part of what it means to be sinners. We

need to be taught to be generous, which is why instruction about giving is a necessary part of all well-rounded Christian preaching.

The apostle Paul taught those who were converted to Jesus Christ through his ministry to be generous. Here in Romans 15, as he writes to the believers in Rome to explain why he is being delayed in his plans to come to them on his way to Spain, he refers to what he had done to teach the Christians in the eastern half of the empire about giving. In doing so, he gives us important insights into this vital part of what it means to be a Christian. Paul writes, "Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way" (Rom. 15:25-28).

The Gentile Offering

When we study what is said about this offering from the Gentile churches for the saints in Jerusalem, in Acts and in Paul's writings, we learn quickly that it was a very important matter for Paul.

The idea of a special offering seems to have entered his mind when he was in Jerusalem to argue the case for Gentile liberty against attempts by Jewish legalizers to force Gentiles to obey the requirements of the Old Testament ceremonial law. We have two accounts of the council at which this took place, in Acts 15 and Galatians 2. In Galatians Paul reports that his view of the gospel, including the rights of Gentile liberty, was upheld by the other apostles and that they endorsed his Gentile ministry. He says that James, Peter, and John "gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews." But he adds, "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Gal. 2:9-10). In

other words, the Jerusalem leaders asked aid for the poor in Jerusalem, and Paul agreed to help.

This was a legitimate request. Jerusalem was a poor area of the world, and the Christians there were very poor. Rome was rich, since the wealth of the world poured into Rome. But in order for wealth to flow to Rome it had to flow from other places, and it most often flowed from the outlying provinces, such as Judea. The provinces were impoverished to enrich the capital.

Then, too, the Christians in Jerusalem may have exacerbated their own problems, though with good will. C. H. Dodd, in his commentary on Romans, suggests that the system of Christian communism that the early church established in Jerusalem had contributed significantly to its poverty: "The Jerusalem church contained from the beginning many poor and few rich. Filled with a sense of their unity as 'brethren,' they instituted a system of partial and voluntary communism. But they carried it out in the economically disastrous way of realizing capital and distributing it as income (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34-5:5). So far as we can gather, no practical steps were taken to replace the capital thus dissipated; and when hard times came, the community had no reserves of any kind." If this is a right assessment, then the Christians in Jerusalem were not only poor, they were poorer than most of the other poor people around them. It would be a right response for the richer Gentile congregations elsewhere to help out.

Yet even this does not fully explain Paul's preoccupation with this offering, and Leon Morris is right when he observes that Paul must have seen it as an important symbol of the unity of believers: "Some early Christians held that all converts ought to be circumcised and to live according to the Jewish law; Paul had a continuing controversy with people who held such views. His collection would show that those who rejected this hard-line conservatism were nevertheless bound to Jewish believers in ties of genuine Christian love."

Perhaps they would also show the Jerusalem leaders that Paul had been successful in his missionary work. This would not be the noblest of

motives, but Paul may have had a bit of pride in wanting to collect this offering and accompany it to Jerusalem himself to show Peter, James, and John and the others how he had honored his agreement to help out and even demonstrate how bountifully he had been able to do it.

How Paul Viewed This Offering

Whatever Paul's motivation for asking might have been, it was right that Christians of means should have assisted those who were in want, and Paul was right to teach the Gentile Christians that they should be generous in responding to the need of their Jewish brethren. How he looked at the collection at this stage is seen in our text. He says three things about it:

1. *It was "in the service of the saints" in Jerusalem (v. 25).* The word that is translated *service* is the one from which we get the word *deacon.* It occurs just a few verses further on in chapter 16, where Phoebe is commended as a "servant" or "deaconess" of the church in Cenchrea. We recognize that caring for the poor is a legitimate function of the diaconate. But since Paul was not a deacon but rather an apostle and yet is saying here that his role in collecting and delivering this offering for the saints at Jerusalem was a diaconal service, we learn that we are all to be engaged in this kind of service. In other words, the role of the deacons is not to minister in our place, so we do not have to care for the needs of others, but rather to show us how to minister— just as ruling elders show us how to exercise spiritual oversight of one another, and teaching elders lead us in how to study and understand the Bible. Caring for other people is every Christian's job.

Moreover, it is a necessary spiritual fruit, which is exactly what Paul calls it in verse 28. This means that if the life of Christ is really found in us, then we will care for others as a natural and necessary expression of our transformed lives. The apostle James wrote, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his

physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:15-17).

One reason we must be generous is because generosity is evidence that we are Christians. If we do not care for other people or the work of God, why should we suppose we are Christians?

2. *The Gentiles "were pleased" to help out (v. 26).* The second thing Paul says about this offering in writing about it to the Romans is that the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to share in it. He stresses this point by repeating it twice, once in verse 26 and a second time in verse 27.

Were the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia *really* pleased to do it? I ask this question, because the answer is not a clear-cut yes. It is actually yes and no. The Christians of Macedonia had been willing. Indeed, they had been supporting Paul even before he began to take up this particular collection, and Paul commends them for their generosity on more than one occasion. This was not quite the case with the Christians in Achaia. On the contrary Paul seems to have had difficulty collecting the offering there. We know this because of his two letters to the Corinthians, particularly 2 Corinthians, where he urges the church there to get on with the offering that they had promised but had been slow in taking up.

The problem was that the Corinthians had not followed through on their original early commitment. They seemed to have been willing at first. But like many of us, they had let the matter of their giving to God's work slide. Paul was sending Titus, one of his faithful fellow workers and companions, along with two other unnamed brothers to receive this offering, and he was writing to ensure that the Corinthians would actually take the offering and have it waiting when they arrived (2 Cor. 8:16-18).

Generosity is a natural part of being Christians, but we must be taught to give. That is what Paul was doing in his extensive teaching about giving in 2 Corinthians and in writing to the Romans. We need the same

kind of teaching today, even though people dislike being instructed about giving.

3. *The Gentiles who had "shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings owe[d] it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings" (v. 27).* The third thing Paul says about giving in writing to the Christians at Rome is that the Gentiles of Greece owed support to the Christians of Judea because they had received their spiritual blessings through them. It is a simple principle: A Bible teacher ought to be supported. He should not have to do secular work to support himself, though good ministers are usually happy to do it if that should prove necessary. Paul himself worked as a tentmaker at Corinth, when his support funds were low or slow in coming.

God's Formula for Great Giving

Anyone who has ever tried to get someone else to give to religious or charitable causes knows how difficult motivating another person can be. So it may be useful to ask: How did Paul motivate the Corinthians, who seem to have been reluctant, to be faithful in this area? It is noteworthy that he did not nag, scold, beg, or plead. But neither was he against using some very direct motivation. If we read 1 Corinthians 8 and 9 carefully, we will find him appealing to the need for personal consecration on the Corinthians' part, the example of Christ, the love and grace of God for us, and even to a proper kind of pride and self-interest.

The chief element in Paul's attempt to motivate the Corinthians to great giving was the example of the poorer churches of Macedonia. Like Judea, Macedonia was a poor area. Corinth was a prosperous place by comparison. How is it that the poorer Macedonian churches had been able to set such a good example for Corinth? The answer to this question is in 2 Corinthians 8:2, which I call "God's Formula for Great Giving": "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." Here are three elements: (1) a severe trial, (2) overflowing joy, and (3) extreme poverty. Combined, says Paul, they produced exemplary generosity.

1. *A severe trial.* We do not know what this severe trial was. It may have been persecution. It may have been the poverty. Whatever it was, it represented circumstances that we would probably call unendurable or at least severely trying.

This is not the way we would expect things to be. We think that if a person is going through some trial, his or her attention should rightly be directed to that problem and not to the needs of other people. That is how we would expect to react ourselves. But here, as in so many areas of life, Christian experience is entirely different from what we would expect. When Christians go through trials, they think about others who are also suffering and they reach out to them.

The best example is Jesus, who, when he was hanging on the cross, thought of the soldiers
("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," Luke 23:34), his mother ("Dear woman, here is your son," John 19:26) and the dying thief ("I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise," Luke 23:43).

2. *Overflowing joy.* Paul does not say what the Macedonian Christians were joyful about, but we may suppose their joy came from several things. They would have had joy in salvation, for Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians that the believers in that city welcomed the message with "the *joy* given by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:6). Before the coming of the gospel they were lost in heathen darkness and were, like Paul's description of the Ephesians, "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). After they had believed, they were conscious of having found God and of having passed out of darkness into light, and they were joyful.

Similarly, in Philippians Paul speaks explicitly of the believers' "*joy* in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:26), urging them to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4), that is, to continue as they were doing.

Every Christian should be joyful, of course. But we are concerned with the link between joy and giving, and one thing joy must indicate in this context is that the giving of the Macedonians was unconstrained—it was of their own free will, which is why it was joyful. As long as our giving is constrained, as it is when we give our taxes to the government, it is a burden and is frequently coupled with resentment. But when we give freely, as we ought to do for Christian causes, we give joyfully and our joy is enhanced by giving.

I think here of Frances Ridley Havergal, who wrote lines we often sing with little understanding or commitment:

> Take my silver and my gold,
> Not a mite would I withhold.

Those lines were autobiographical. That is, Frances Havergal did what she described. We know from her writings left behind at her death that at the time she wrote those words she sent to the Church Missionary Society all her gold and silver jewelry, including a jewel chest she described as being fit for a countess. She wrote to a close friend, "I don't need to tell you that I never packed a box with such pleasure." That is a joy generous Christians recognize. They know that joy leads to generous giving, as 2 Corinthians teaches. It is enhanced by it.

3. *Extreme poverty.* The third element in this formula for generous giving is poverty—indeed, extreme poverty. What an utterly contrary principle from what the world teaches! If you hire a fund-raising organization to help raise large sums of money for a secular charity, you will be told that the first third of the goal must be raised by advance gifts from large donors, the second third by nearly as large gifts from very wealthy people, and only the last third from your organization's regular constituency. Or, depending on the cause, the expectations may be even more disproportionate. Sometimes the gifts from large donors are supposed to be at least 80 percent of the whole.

That is not how it is in Christian circles. Large gifts have their place, perhaps to launch a new project or pay for a special need. But by and large, the work of the church is sustained by the regular small gifts of

people who are not wealthy. In fact, in many places the spreading of the gospel is underwritten almost entirely by the very, very poor.

Some time ago I came across statistics that showed that giving among the very poor is remarkable. In the United States those below the poverty line give about 5 percent of their income to charitable causes. Those who are in the middle income brackets give slightly more, about 7 percent, because they have more from which to give. But when people move into the highest brackets, that is, above $100,000 per year, the rate falls back to only 2 percent. So, statistically, it is usually not the rich who give generously but those who are not nearly so well off.

The Macedonians were poor and had undergone severe trials. But the result of this unusual combination of circumstances was great giving. It was according to the formula "Severe trials + overflowing joy + extreme poverty = rich generosity." This is something like saying, "Minus one, minus fifteen, minus three equals a million," but that is God's arithmetic, strange as it may seem to us. And it works wonderfully.

The Secret of Great Giving

Verse 5 adds a further explanation of the remarkable giving of the Macedonian Christians: "And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will." As we well know, trials and poverty do not in themselves produce great giving, not even among Christians. In fact, they sometimes do the opposite. They produce bitterness in people who thereby become self-centered, mean, tight-fisted, and greedy.

What makes the difference, as Paul explains in this verse, is whether the Christians involved have: (1) first given themselves to the Lord and (2) then given themselves to others as a consequence.

It is hard to emphasize giving ourselves to God too much, because in the fullest sense everything in the Christian life begins, continues, and ends with this necessity. It begins here, because this is what it means to be a Christian in the first place. To be a Christian is to surrender oneself

to Jesus Christ, repenting of sin, believing on him, and beginning to follow him as one's Master. It continues here, because Jesus calls us to a life of discipleship, which means serving him as Lord of our entire lives. It ends here, because Christians must persevere in this calling to the very end.

Some years ago I heard a prominent member of a board of directors of an organization say, "To be a good board member you should be able to give one of three things: time, talent, or treasure." That is good worldly wisdom, but a Christian will do better. A Christian will give everything he or she is or has to Jesus Christ because Jesus has first given himself for us. If you have trusted Christ as your Savior, you will want to give yourself and your treasure to others, as he gave himself for you. Or else, you need to be taught to do it!

Chapter 229.
The Full Measure of God's Blessing

Romans 15:29

We are at the end of a long paragraph in which Paul has been telling the Christians at Rome of his plans to visit them after first going to Jerusalem to present the offering for the poor that he had raised among the Gentile churches. He told them that he had wanted to come to Rome earlier; he had been delayed by his earlier missionary work and by the need to accompany the offering, but he is certain that his proposed visit will at last come to pass. He says, "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ."

Leon Morris points out, as others also have, that these words are a mark of the letter's authenticity and early date, since no one who knew how Paul actually came to Rome (as a prisoner in chains) would have put it this way.

That is an interesting observation, but it is not what ought to occupy our thoughts here. What is important is that Paul anticipated coming to

Rome in the "full measure" of Christ's blessing. What is the nature of this "full" blessing? Is it something in which we can share? If it is, how can we be certain of sharing in it? These are questions no true Christian should ignore.

Let's begin with the meaning of the word *blessing. Blessing* is not easy to define and has various meanings. Next, we will look at the types of blessing we encounter in the Old and New Testaments. Third, we will study what Jesus had to say about blessing, based on his illustration of the vine and the branches in John 15. Finally, though briefly, we will ask what the requirements are if we ourselves are to be channels of such blessing.

What Does *Blessing* Mean?

What does *blessing* mean, and what does Paul mean when he says, "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ"?

1. *Set apart to God. Blessing* has an interesting history. In the early days of the development of the English language, before the Norman conquest, there were more than thirty Anglo-Saxon forms of the words *bless*, *blessed,* and *blessing*, words like *bloedsian*, *bledsian*, and *bletsian*. What is common to these words is that they were all based on the Germanic word *blod*, meaning blood, and therefore referred to something that had been set apart to God by a blood ritual.

In today's speech the words that come closest to this are *sanctified* and *consecrated,* though we preserve this earliest meaning of *blessed* and actually use the word itself in two common expressions. First, we speak of "the blessed sacrament," meaning that the communion elements have been set apart for a spiritual purpose. Second, we "bless" people, which is what pastors do at the end of a worship service and what we also do when someone we know sneezes and we respond, "God bless you." We may not know what we intend by that expression, but what it means is that we want the person to be set apart to God and his service.

2. *To speak well of some person.* A second meaning of the word *blessed* comes to us through the French and Latin languages. The Normans, who invaded England in 1066, brought French with them, including the word *benir*, meaning bless, which was based on the common ecclesiastical Latin term *benedicere*, which meant to speak well of somebody. It was used in the Latin Bible for blessing or praising God. This sense of the word occurs in Luke's gospel in reference to human beings when Jesus tells his disciples, "Bless them that curse you." He means that although our enemies speak badly of us, we are to speak good about them. In time this meaning of blessing attached itself to the older Anglo-Saxon expressions so that blessing began to mean not only to be set apart to God but to be well spoken of or well regarded.

3. *An exceptional state of happiness.* A third meaning of *blessing and blessed* comes from their being close in sound to another old English word, *bliss*, meaning an exceptional state of happiness or well-being. Because the words were alike, *blessed* soon took on this meaning too, which is the sense it has in the Beatitudes, where Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit.... Blessed are those who mourn.... Blessed are the meek...." and so on. He meant that people who are like this will be deeply and profoundly happy.

In Romans 15:29, the term probably includes all three meanings: to be set apart to God, to be spoken well of, and to be happy. The meanings belong together like this: First, Paul is confident that when he comes to Rome he will do so as an appointed and consecrated messenger of God, who is therefore blessed by God in the sense that God's good words will accompany him and prosper what he does for God. Therefore, because he is God's servant and will be blessed by God in his service, he is profoundly happy and will continue to be so.

Isn't that a wonderful way to face the future? Don't you wish you could face tomorrow like that? The point of this study is that you can, if you will look upon your life and order it as Paul did.

Two Kinds of Blessing

There are at least two types of blessing found in the Bible.

1. *Every spiritual blessing in Christ.* First, there are the blessings that are ours right now because of our being united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Many verses speak of this: Romans 8:17, which calls us God's heirs ("heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ"); 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, which tells us that everything is ours ("All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God"); and 1 Timothy 6:17, which says that God has given us all things richly to enjoy ("Hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment").

The most important of these verses is Ephesians 1:3, which says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." This is important because it teaches that every possible spiritual blessing we could ever have is already ours by virtue of our being united to our Savior.

Not long ago a speaker at one of our 1994 Philadelphia Conferences on Reformed Theology called attention to a fine expression of this truth by John Calvin:

If we seek *salvation,* we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is "of him" (1 Cor. 1:30). If we seek any other *gifts of the Spirit,* they will be found in his anointing. If we seek *strength,* it lies in his dominion; if *purity,* in his conception; if *gentleness,* it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects (Heb. 2:17) that he might learn to feel our pain (cf. Heb. 5:2). If we seek *redemption,* it lies in his passion; if *acquittal,* in his condemnation; if *remission of the curse,* in his cross (Gal. 3:13); if *satisfaction,* in his sacrifice; if *purification,* in his blood; if *reconciliation,* in his descent into hell; if *mortification of the flesh,* in his tomb; if *newness of life,* in his resurrection; if *immortality,* in the same; if *inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom,* in his

entrance into heaven; if *protection,* if *security,* if *abundant supply of all blessings,* in his Kingdom; if *untroubled expectation of judgment,* in the power given to him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.

2. *Blessing on our work for God.* The second type of blessing mentioned in the Bible is blessing on our work for God—that is, on our ministry. This kind of blessing is not complete or automatic, as the first is, since it relates at least in part to how closely we are following after Christ and also to whether we seek this blessing and ask God for it. Moses was one who knew this, which is why his hymn on the shortness and frailty of human life ends with this prayer:

> *May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands.*
>
> *Psalm 90:17*

Of course, this is what Paul also has in mind as he writes to the Roman Christians. He is not writing about the blessings that are already ours in Christ. He has them, and so do the Roman Christians. Rather, Paul is writing that his future visit to Rome might be spiritually profitable. We remember that he also spoke of this at the very beginning of the letter when he wrote, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (Rom. 1:11). Paul wanted his life to count for God wherever he was or would be. Since he was coming to Rome, he wanted his days in Rome to be blessed by God in the lives of the Christians who lived there.

Moreover, he wanted his coming to Rome to count to the greatest degree imaginable. He wanted to experience the full measure of the blessings of Christ in the lives of the Christians.

Have you ever thought of your life in these terms? Most Christians want God to bless them, meaning that they want God to preserve them from physical harm, give them a long life, help them to make a lot of money,

and keep their children out of trouble. Those are blessings, of course. But they are self-centered, and they certainly do not represent the fullness of what God is capable of doing or is willing to do in and through us for the spiritual well-being of other people. I encourage you to think of your life as a means by which God might be able to impart spiritual blessings to other people.

The Vine and the Branches

I have mentioned Moses' prayer that the work of his hands might be established and blessed by
God and Paul's desire that he might come to Rome in the full measure of the blessing of Jesus Christ. This was also the desire of the Lord Jesus Christ for us, as expressed in his teaching about the vine and the branches in John 15:1-17:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his

friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.

My chief reason for citing this passage in full is the progression Jesus develops using the word *fruit,* which is the equivalent in this illustration of the blessing Paul was seeking on his ministry in Rome. It is fourfold, and it requires the entire passage to see it.

1. *Fruit (vv. 1-4).* In the first paragraph of this address Jesus stresses that the purpose of the disciples' union with him, as branches with a vine, is that they might bear fruit. There are no qualifying adjectives attached to fruit at this point. Christ's concern is simply that there *be* fruit. Indeed, this is the concern of the Father too, according to Jesus, for the Father is pictured as the gardener who both trims the vine and prunes the branches to make them fruitful. The importance of bearing fruit appears clearly in the next paragraph, for what Jesus seems to be teaching there is that if we do not bear fruit, we do not belong to Christ; that is, we are not in the vine, we are not his.

The idea of the Father cutting off every branch that does not bear fruit (v. 2) and the later reference to such unproductive branches being "thrown away" and even cast "into the fire and burned" (v. 6) has sounded to many people as if those who have once belonged to Jesus Christ can perish. They are troubled by what seems to be the teaching that we can lose our salvation. That is not right, of course. Other passages clearly refute it (see John 10:27-30; Rom. 8:31-39; Phil. 1:6). But if these verses from John 15 do not teach that our salvation can be lost due to our being unfruitful, what do they mean?

Various answers have been given. One is that it is the worldly works of unprofitable Christians that are spoken of as being burned up, not the

believers themselves, much as Paul speaks of "the quality of each man's work" being revealed by fire in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. But in John 15 Jesus is clearly speaking of the branches. A second explanation is that it is as "a branch" that the believer is cast out, not as "a son." The problem with this interpretation is that it introduces a distinction into the allegory that is not present and is foreign to Jesus' teaching.

Years ago I tended to either of those two explanations, but today I think that the Puritans (and others) were right when they said that casting out applies to those who are Christians in name only, the bottom line being that Christians must bear fruit if they are truly Christians. I think this fits Jesus' teaching, because Jesus frequently taught that the Jews of his day, who considered themselves to be fruit-bearing children of God, would be rejected at the last judgment. It also fits what Paul developed in Romans 11 by a similar image, when he taught that Jewish branches had been broken off the olive tree of salvation in order that Gentiles might be grafted in.

2. *Even more fruitful (v. 2).* The second step in Jesus' fourfold development of the fruit idea is that the Father's chief object in trimming the vine's branches is that they might be "even more fruitful." "More" is the first qualifying adjective. It is a searching word, as Andrew Murray pointed out in his valuable devotional study *The True Vine*, because "as churches and individuals we are in danger of nothing so much as self-contentment. The secret spirit of Laodicea—we are rich and increased in goods, and have need of nothing—may prevail where it is not suspected. The divine warning—poor and wretched and miserable—finds little response just where it is most needed."

So I ask: Has a torpid spirit of self-satisfaction and vain contentment settled upon you? Do you feel that you have done enough? That your church has achieved all it needs to achieve? That you know all you need to know of Christian doctrine or have witnessed for Christ sufficiently? If so, you should remember how Jesus said that when we have done

everything we have been told to do we must still say, "We are unworthy servants" (Luke 17:10).

3. *Much fruit (vv. 5-8).* In the next paragraph of Jesus' teaching a second modifier occurs with the word fruit, *much.* It occurs twice, in verses 5 and 8: "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (v. 5), and "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (v. 8).

It is sad that so many Christians expect so little of Jesus. It may be because they consider *much* of anything to be worldly—too much money, too much fun. But I suspect the real reason is because they are self-satisfied and lazy. If this is true of you, Jesus' words should be a strong rebuke, for they say that what he desires of you is not fruit only or even more fruit this year than last, but much fruit. If you take that seriously, you will attempt great things for God, knowing that little fruit brings little glory either to the Father or the Son but that much fruit brings much glory to them.

4. *Fruit that will last (v. 16).* Toward the end of this passage Jesus adds one more step in his fourfold development of the spiritual fruit illustration. He speaks of "fruit that will last" (v. 16). Not all fruit does last. In fact, in purely agricultural terms no fruit actually lasts at all. All fruit decays, rots, and eventually becomes unsuitable to eat. The same is true of much of what we do. Many of our most extensive efforts come to nothing. In time we ourselves die and pass away. The one thing that does remain is the spiritual fruit produced in and through the lives of those who are united to Jesus Christ. God is eternal. Consequently, what he does through us is eternal too. We echo this truth in a bit of Christian doggerel that goes:

Only one life! 'Twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Christ will last.

In truth, much of what is done even in the name of Christ will not last because it is not done in the spirit of Christ and by his power. But if

Jesus is working in us, we can know that what *he* is doing will be wonderfully fruitful and never pass away.

Are you doing what Christ would have you do? And are you doing it in his name and by his power? Remember that it is possible to build a great monument to self out of wood, hay, and stubble. A haystack can be a very large thing. But it will not last the winter, and all that is done in the power of the flesh and for the flesh will be destroyed too. Make sure that what you do is in "the full measure of the blessing of Christ."

If You Would Be Fruitful

I do not know if Paul had heard of Jesus' teaching about the vine and the branches, but he knew the truths that are in it, and he also knew and practiced the requirements Jesus gave for being fruitful.

First, we must remain in close fellowship with Christ ("No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me," John 15:4). Second, we must know that we are nothing in ourselves ("Apart from me you can do nothing," v. 5). Third, we must be filled with Christ's word ("If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you," v. 7). Fourth, we must love each other (vv. 12, 17). That is exactly what we will do if we want to come to others in the fullness of Christ's blessing.

Chapter 230.
Pray for Me!

Romans 15:30-32

In the last study we looked at how confident Paul was that when he came to Rome it would be "in the full measure of the blessing of Christ." I ended by listing the requirements for such blessing, the basis for Paul's confidence, based on Jesus' teaching about the vine and the branches in John 15. Yet Paul undoubtedly also prayed for God's blessing on his pending visit to Rome and asked other believers to pray

too. Paul was confident of God's richest blessing on his ministry because he had asked God for it.

In the final paragraph of Romans 15 Paul passes to the subject of prayer, urging the Christians at Rome to pray for him. This is not unusual. It was Paul's regular practice to request prayers for himself and his ministry. We can think of many passages where he does it: 2 Corinthians 1:10-
11; Ephesians 6:19-20; Philippians 1:19; Colossians 4:3-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2
Thessalonians 3:1-2. But this is a strong and very impassioned plea, undoubtedly because of the difficulties Paul foresaw in going to Jerusalem. In these verses Paul describes prayer as a struggle and brings in each member of the Trinity: "I urge you, brothers, by our *Lord Jesus Christ* and by the love of *the Spirit,* to join me in my struggle by praying to *God* for me" (v. 30).

John Murray says of this verse, "God answered the prayers but not in the ways that Paul had hoped for or anticipated. The lessons to be derived from verses 30-33 are numberless." I agree with John Murray, for none of us prays as well, fervently, or with as much understanding as we should.

Prayer Is Not Useless

One of the reasons why we do not pray as we should is that we do not realize the seriousness of what is going on or our part in it. According to Ephesians 6, we are embroiled in fierce spiritual warfare, and prayer is our weapon. Paul realized that intensely, which is why he engages the believers at Rome to join his struggles by praying to God on his behalf.

A great Bible teacher of the early part of this century, Reuben A. Torrey, was at a Bible conference in St. Louis. Another minister was speaking on "The Rest of Faith," saying that Jesus has won all spiritual victories for us and that all we need to do is rest on Christ's work. There is a sense in which that is true, of course. But the preacher overextended himself when he exclaimed, "I challenge anybody to show me a single

passage in the Bible where we are told to wrestle in prayer." Torrey was on the platform, and he says that although one speaker does not like to contradict another, this was a challenge he had to take up. So he said softly, "Romans 15:30, brother." Fortunately the other speaker was honest enough to admit that Torrey was right. For what Romans 15:30 says is that we are to struggle together in prayer and that much depends on it.

It is helpful to know that the Greek word here is *synagonizomai*, which is a compound made up of the preposition meaning *with* (*syn*) plus the word from which we get our words *agony, agonize*, and *antagonist* (*agonizomai*). An *agon* was an athletic contest. Thus, *agonizomai* described the struggle that took place in an athletic contest and by extension in any other conflict as well. Jesus used the word when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would *fight..."* (John 18:36). His word for fight is *agonize*. In Luke 22:44, this is the word that is used to describe our Lord's fervent prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke says, "And being in *anguish*, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." To return to Paul, both the noun and verb occur in Paul's summation of his ministry, where he says: "I have *fought* the good *fight*" (2 Tim. 4:7).

This, then, is why prayer is not a useless exercise. We are engaged in a great spiritual struggle against the devil and his schemes, and prayer is the only way we can participate in it. **Prayer Is Effective**

The second lesson of Paul's important paragraph about prayer is that prayer is useful. As James says, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

It had to be if it was going to help Paul. In verse 31 of this section Paul asks the Roman
Christians to pray for two things: first, that he would be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and second, that his service in Jerusalem

might be accepted by the saints there. There was ample cause for his anxiety on both counts. Paul was aware of how intensely he was hated by the Jews. They saw him as a Jewish renegade and heretic who was teaching a disastrous theology and undermining Judaism. The proof of their hatred (and of the danger to which Paul was exposed) was seen in their reception of Paul when he arrived in the city and was making his way to the temple. His enemies saw him and stirred up the masses of the people, shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place" (Acts 21:28). This last charge was untrue, but it was effective in causing the people to seize Paul and try to kill him. He was saved from the mob only because the commander of the Roman garrison sent soldiers into the crowd to take him into custody. Yet even as they did, the people kept crying out for his death (v. 36).

What about Paul's second area of concern, that his service (he means the offering that he had received from the Gentiles) might be acceptable to the Jerusalem saints? We might wonder how any offer of financial assistance could be unacceptable, but we need to remember how fiercely many Jewish Christians felt about the Mosaic law and how fanatically they opposed Paul's insistence that Gentiles should not be subjected to its strictures. Paul wanted the Gentile offering to heal this division, but it was possible that it could have had a directly opposite effect. It could have been seen as a bribe and only have intensified the hostility.

So what was the outcome? Well, in the first instance Paul was indeed delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, though not in the way he would have wanted or expected. When the riot occurred, he was rescued by the soldiers. And though he spent the next two years in custody in Caesarea and at least two years as a prisoner in Rome, he did at last get to Rome and possibly to Spain as well.

There is also reason to believe that the Gentile offering partially healed the breach between Jewish and Gentile Christianity, for the leaders thanked Paul for his concern and praised God for his ministry, while

reminding him that God was also working among them to save many Jews and bless Jewish Christianity (see Acts 21:17-20).

Does prayer work? Yes, in the sense that it changes us. But it also works in the sense that it is God's appointed means to spiritual victory and right ends. Charles Hodge wrote in connection with these verses, "Prayer (and even intercessory prayer) has a real and important efficacy; not merely in its influence on the mind of him who offers it, but also in securing the blessings for which we pray. Paul directed the Roman Christians to pray for the exercise of the divine providence in protecting him from danger, and for the Holy Spirit to influence the minds of the brethren in Jerusalem. This he would not have done, were such petitions of no avail."

Earlier I cited James 5:16 to show that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Another verse from that letter, James 4:2, shows that the reason we do not experience the full measure of the blessing of Christ is that we do not ask for it: "You do not have, because you do not ask God." Unfortunately, we are often woefully deficient in this area.

Let me tell you how Dwight L. Moody became an evangelist. Moody was a shoe salesman who was also the teacher of a boy's Bible class in Chicago. He was there at the time of the Great Chicago Fire, and after he had done his part in getting together some money to help the poor and buy a building for his own work, he went to England for a rest. He did not intend to preach. He only wanted to hear Charles Spurgeon, George Mueller, and some others. But one Sunday he was invited to preach in a Congregational church in north London, and he accepted.

Sunday morning did not go well. Moody said that he had "no power, no liberty; it seemed like pulling a heavy train up a steep grade." It was so bad that he tried to get out of preaching the evening service, for which he had also been invited, but the minister would not let him off.

That evening it was quite different. Moody felt unusual power, and when he got to the end he decided to give an invitation. He asked all

who wanted to accept Christ to get to their feet, and about five hundred people did. Moody thought there must be some mistake, perhaps they just didn't understand him. So he asked them to sit down. Then he said, "After this meeting there will be an after-service in the vestry, and I invite all who are serious about receiving Christ to come to that meeting." There was a door to the vestry on each side of the pulpit, and when the service was over the people began to stream through.

"Who are all these people?" Moody asked the pastor. "Are they yours?"

"Some of them are."

"Are they Christians?"

"Not as far as I know," was the reply.

Moody went into the vestry and repeated the invitation in even stronger terms, and the people all once again expressed their willingness to become Christians. Moody still thought there must be some mistake. He said, "I have to go to Ireland tomorrow, but your pastor will still be here and if you really mean what you have just said, come tomorrow night and meet with him again." A few days later, when he was in Ireland, Moody received a telegram from the minister saying, "There were more people here on Monday night than on Sunday. A revival has broken out in our church, and you must return from Ireland and help me." Moody did return, and what happened in those days was the basis for the invitations that later took him back to England and then over the whole world as an evangelist.

That alone is a remarkable story, but here is the rest of it. There were two sisters in that north
London church, one of whom was a bed-ridden invalid. After the morning service at which Moody had first preached the healthy sister came home and reported that a Mr. Moody had been there that morning.

"Mr. Moody of Chicago?" asked the sister. When told that he was the one who had preached, the sick sister said, "I have read about him in the newspapers and have been praying that he would come to London and

that God would send him to our church. If I had known that it was he who would be preaching this morning, I would have eaten no breakfast and have spent the time praying instead. Now leave me alone. Don't let anyone in to see me. I am going to spend the rest of the day and evening fasting and in prayer." That is what she did, and the revival in north London resulted.

Is prayer effective? Indeed it is! What is more, it is the only thing that is effective in this great spiritual struggle for the minds and souls of men and women. It is God's appointed means to revival.

Prayer Is Necessary

The third point this passage teaches is that prayer is necessary. It is not only effective, it is the only thing that *is* effective. Therefore it is absolutely necessary that we pray to see individuals saved and experience other spiritual blessings and results. Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day."

I include this point on the basis of Paul's reference to the will of God in verse 32: "so that *by God's will* I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed." Does that mean that prayer gets God to change his will so that he conforms to our wishes, or does it mean only that we are changed to accept what he is going to do anyway?

There are two common errors at this point. The first is the error of a superficial Calvinism, which understands that God is sovereign and that his will is always done. It errs in deducing that because this is true, prayer is virtually unimportant except in regard to how it changes us. The second is the Arminian error, which makes God somehow weakly dependent on us. William Evans, in *Why Pray,* writes, "Prayer does not change God's purposes and plans; but it releases them and permits God to do in, for and through us all that which his infinite love and wisdom want to do, but which because of lack of prayer he has not been able to do.... Prayer gives God the opportunity to do for us what he wants to

do.... [We should not] think that God can do whatever he wants to do without our aid. He cannot."

Cannot? Unable? Give God the opportunity? Anyone who knows anything about the majestic sovereign God of the Bible knows that there is something terribly wrong with this approach.

The answer is a better understanding of true Calvinism, which realizes that God does not only appoint the end to be obtained, but he also designates the means to attain that end. Therefore, if God has appointed a widespread revival or the salvation of an individual or any other blessing and if he has determined that the means by which that blessing shall be received is prayer, then it is as necessary that we pray as it is that this predetermined blessing come about. Prayer is inseparably linked to election, just as witnessing and the preaching of the Word are linked to it. If God has determined to do something in response to the prayers of his people, then his people must pray. Indeed, he will lead them to do so.

John Calvin said, "The phrase *through the will of God* reminds us of the necessity of devoting ourselves to prayer, since God alone directs all our paths by his providence." Torrey declared, "Prayer is God's appointed way for obtaining things." He concluded that the major reason for all lack in our experience, life, and work is prayer's neglect.

Prayer Is Difficult

So why do we neglect prayer? Maybe because we do not believe that what I have just said is true or important, but perhaps also because prayer is so difficult. It must be difficult, because Paul calls it a struggle. People who pray well know what that means.

The next question is why prayer is difficult. One reason is that prayer is a spiritual battleground.

Our enemy is the devil, and we cannot expect things to be easy when we are struggling with Satan for the souls of men and women. Again, prayer is difficult because we do not know God or God's ways as we

ought to know them. Therefore we often do not really know what to pray for. Paul understood this problem well, for he wrote earlier in Romans, "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Rom. 8:26). In other words, one of the works of the Holy Spirit is to pray for us and with us and so make up for our great spiritual ignorance and deficiencies.

But let me suggest one other reason why prayer is so difficult for us based on what we find in Romans: We are too self-centered in our prayers. Have you noticed how unselfish Paul's prayer requests were? They were for his safety and success in Jerusalem, but not simply that he might have an easy time. He wanted his service to be so well received that it would help heal the breach between Gentile and Jewish Christianity. He wanted to be delivered from the unbelievers in Jerusalem so that his ministry among the Gentiles might be continued with God's blessing. Indeed, the last verse of our passage says, "... so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed" (v. 32).

I am reminded of the story of a little girl who had been to a Sunday school lesson on prayer and had been taught that Jesus said, "If anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:23). The child could see a large mountain from her bedroom window, and the next day her mother came by her room and heard her praying that God would cast the mountain into the sea. "Why do you want to pray a prayer like that?" her mother asked. "Why would you ever want that mountain thrown into the sea?"

"Oh," said the little girl, "I'd love to see the big splash it would make when it came down."

Unfortunately, many of our prayers are only a little less selfish than that. And since selfishness is sin and sin is a barrier to prayer (see Isa. 59:1-3), it is not surprising that we find prayer difficult and that our specific prayers often go unanswered.

Prayer Is Commanded

Paul's words are a command: "Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued."

Jesus also taught us to pray. Remember his story about the unjust judge and persistent widow who kept coming to him until he finally gave her what she wanted (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus did not teach that God is an unjust judge; but he wanted us to know that we "should always pray and not give up" (v. 1). Jesus prayed! So did the apostles. So have all the saints through all the ages. Can we neglect it? Reuben Torrey was right when he said that whatever else we may learn on this subject, what we must certainly learn is this: "I must pray, pray, pray. I must put all my energy and all my heart into prayer. Whatever else I do, I must pray."

Chapter 231.
The Second Benediction

Romans 15:33

Have you ever had the experience of trying to say good-bye to someone or trying to end a conversation, but because new topics kept coming up you found yourself saying good-bye again and again? That happens between lovers all the time. It happened between Romeo and Juliet. In the hands of William Shakespeare it has given us one of the sweetest and most memorable partings in all literature. You might remember these words from Act 2:

> Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow That I should say good night till it be morrow.

We see something like this as we come to the end of Romans. In every one of his letters Paul ends with a benediction, but in Romans he does this more than once. He ends the eleventh chapter with a doxology that could have been a benediction. But even after he gets into the application part of the letter (chaps. 12-16) he seems to be trying to end:

first, in the middle of chapter 15; next at the end of the same chapter; then, twice more toward the end of the letter.

Halfway through chapter 15 he wrote, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (v. 13). Romans 16:20 says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." The chapter ends, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (vv. 25-27).

Our text is the second of three concluding benedictions: "The God of peace be with you all. Amen" (Rom. 15:33). This is the shortest of the benedictions, but in the judgment of at least one commentator it is the greatest.

A World Turned Upside Down

This verse can be thought of as "the greatest" in the sense that it speaks of peace, the greatest need of sinful men and women.

1. *A world at war.* The earliest of all historical records, a Sumerian bas-relief from Babylon (about 3000 B.C.), shows soldiers fighting in close battle order, wearing helmets and carrying shields. Wars are the chief legacy of every ancient culture. The Peloponnesian War that destroyed Greece at the height of her great civilization lasted twenty-seven years. Rome made war a way of life. In the Middle Ages war ravaged Europe, culminating in the Thirty Years' War, which ended in 1648. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* calls the Thirty Years' War "the most horrible military episode in western history prior to the twentieth century." In it one third of the German-speaking people—seven million—lost their lives. Yet for sheer volume of destruction both of lives and property, the wars of our time have greatly exceeded it. Twenty million people died in

World War I. Sixty million died in World War II, while the cost increased from an estimated $340 billion to $1.5 trillion.

In the December 25, 1967, issue of *U.S. News and World Report* an article appeared tabulating that since World War II there have been "at least 12 limited wars in the world, 39 political assassinations, 48 personal revolts, 74 rebellions for independence and 162 social revolutions, either political, economical, racial or religious." A recent book reports that "in 1992 alone, human beings were engaged in ninety-three wars around the world and spent $600 billion dollars preparing for war." There is no end of peace initiatives and treaties, but the ink is scarcely dry on these treaties when guns begin to sound for the next fierce encounter.

2. *No peace for the wicked.* The immediate cause of this persistent lack of peace among nations is that people are not at peace themselves. They are not content. They are not happy to be what they are but are always looking for ways to increase their power, wealth, or reputation at other people's expense. This is what Isaiah was thinking about when he wrote, "The wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'" (Isa. 57:20-21). James, the Lord's brother, touched on the same theme when he queried, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:1-2).

My favorite quotation from the brilliant French apologist Blaise Pascal goes, "I have often felt that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his own room." He might have said that this is the chief problem with the world as well.

3. *At war with God.* Yet there is a cause for the turbulence and evil of the world that goes beyond even personal restlessness, and it is that people are also at war with God. What is even more serious, God

> is at war with them. This takes us back to the very first chapter of Romans, where Paul said that human beings in their fallen state do everything in their power to repress the knowledge of God made known to them in nature, because they are hostile to God and do not want to recognize his demands upon their lives. The key paragraph says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:18-20).

Simply put, people are at war with God, so God is at war with them. Their rage against God spills over into their personal lives, so that they are never content, and into their relationships with other people, so that they are a source of turmoil rather than being peacemakers.

But God is also "the God of peace," as Paul says, because he is the author of peace. This means that he has worked to bring peace to sinful human beings and their world. Our experience of this peace is threefold: (1) peace with God, which is all-important; (2) peace with other human beings; and (3) personal peace in all circumstances.

Peace with God

In his commentary on Romans John Murray remarks on how often Paul in his benedictions "calls God the God of peace or invokes upon his readers the peace that is from God." The reason for this is that a lack of peace is our chief problem. The chief message of the gospel is that God has made peace with us by the blood of Christ's cross.

That is exactly how Paul states it in Colossians 1:19-20: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [that is, in Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the

cross." Our sin is what causes the state of war that exists between ourselves and God, but God has dealt with sin by having his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, die for it. The Bible tells us that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), but it also says that Jesus died in our place to take the penalty for that sin upon himself. The result of this, as Paul says in Romans 8:1, is that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Moreover, as Paul also shows, not only has God brought to an end the cause of hostility between ourselves and himself by the work of Christ, he has also transferred us from the status of rebels against his sovereignty to that of beloved sons and daughters. Paul also writes, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, '*Abba*, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom. 8:15-17).

What we are talking about here is "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1), and it has been achieved for us by God himself through the death of Jesus Christ. This is an objective work, and we enter into it simply by receiving or believing what God has done.

Peace with One Another

The second area in which we experience the peace of which God is the author is peace with one another. This is true for Christians in a general sense because Christians no longer need to contend for their own interests at the expense of other people. Instead of continuing as fierce, selfish belligerents on the world scene, they become true peacemakers.

There is also a specific way in which Christians experience peace with one another, however, and this is within the fellowship of the church in which the walls that formerly divided Christians are broken down—walls of race, economic status, nationality, and educational level.

This is an important theme in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, notably in the second chapter, where he writes of the new community that God has created in Jesus Christ:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14-18

In Paul's mind there was a great visible symbol of the hostility that existed between people and races in the wall that surrounded the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The temple of Paul's day had been built by Herod the Great to replace the inadequate temple that dated from the days of Nehemiah. Much of it was overlaid with gold, and it sat on a raised earth platform known even today as the temple mount. It was surrounded by courts. The innermost court was called the Court of the Priests because only members of the priestly tribe of Levi were permitted to enter. The next court was the Court of Israel; it could be entered by any Jewish male. After this there was the Court of the Women, which could be entered by Jewish women as well as any other Jew.

These courtyards were all on one level. So although there were great differences between them, the differences were not as great as the radical division that came next. From the Court of the Women five steps descended to a level area in which there was a five-foot stone barricade that went completely around the temple enclosure; then, after another level space, fourteen more steps descended to the Court of the Gentiles. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that the wall dividing Jews from Gentiles was marked at intervals by stone inscriptions warning that no foreigner was to enter the Jewish enclosures upon penalty of death.

These inscriptions were like our signs that say "Trespassers will be prosecuted," except that these read, "Trespassers will be killed." We know how seriously this was taken because of the attempt of the Jewish mob to kill Paul when he returned to Jerusalem on the false charge that he had brought a Gentile named Trophimus past these barriers into the inner enclosures of the temple (Acts 21:27-29).

This was the great visible symbol of Jewish-Gentile hostility that Paul had in mind as he wrote of the work of Christ in removing this alienation. In all the ancient world, no wall was as impassable as that between Jews and Gentiles. But Paul says that God has destroyed the barrier in Jesus Christ and has made one new people by him.

He has done this by opening the door to himself to people of all races by faith in Jesus. The temple had another even more significant barrier than those I have mentioned as existing between persons, and that was the great veil that separated the Holy Place, which the appointed priests could enter, and the Most Holy Place, which only the high priest could enter, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement. It symbolized the inaccessibility of God, for God was understood to dwell symbolically within the Most Holy Place between the wings of the cherubim who were perched on the golden covering of the Ark of the Covenant. This was the greatest barrier of all. The entire system of walls and veils was meant to show not only the barriers between various kinds of people, but to highlight the greatest of all barriers, which is the barrier between man and God due to man's sin. The cause of all alienation is sin, and the greatest alienation of all is that between ourselves and the holy God.

But see what God has done! When the Lord Jesus Christ died upon the cross to make atonement for sin, Matthew tells us that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt. 27:51). It was a way of showing that because of his death the way to the Father was now open for all who would come to God by faith in him. Because he was the one, perfect, and allsufficient sacrifice for sin, there is now no longer any need for a line of priests to offer sacrifices. We no longer need an annual Day of Atonement. We no longer even need a temple,

because we have been given access to the true heavenly temple by Christ's death on our behalf (cf. Heb. 9:24-28; 10:19-25).

All who believe on Jesus Christ come to God together. There is no reason for any grounds of separation between us. If we have been reconciled to God, which is the greatest chasm to be covered, then it is certain that the chasms between us and other women and men have been obliterated too.

If you are in Christ, you are one body with every other believer—whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor. So you must act like it. You may not see eye to eye with every other believer in Christ on every possible point of doctrine or practice, but you must know that you belong to other Christians and they to you, and you must work to make that fundamental unity apparent to the world.

If you are not yet a Christian, you should learn that in the final analysis the solution to all your many problems is to be found in your relationship or lack of a relationship to God. The reason the world is not at peace is that it has rejected God. And that is precisely the reason why you are not at peace, too. You need to repent of your sin, including your suspicion of, alienation from, and hostility to other persons, and come to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Peace Passing Human Understanding

Our final experience of the peace of which God is the author is what Paul in Philippians 4:6-7 calls the peace of God: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The peace *of* God is different from peace *with* God, which is what Romans is mostly about.
Peace with God is something that is achieved for us by God himself through the work of Jesus Christ. It is the result of his making

atonement for our sins. The peace of God is something beyond this for those who have given themselves to Christ. In this verse, when Paul writes about anxiety he is thinking of the upsetting situations that come into our lives. Perhaps we have lost a job and are worried about earning enough money to provide for our families. Maybe we are sick, or a friend is sick. We are worried about the outcome. Perhaps someone very close to us has died. Elisabeth Elliot, who had one husband murdered by Auca Indians in Ecuador and another slowly consumed by cancer, said that the death of a husband was like having an eggbeater suddenly thrust into the mixing bowl of her emotional life. She called it a time when the earth seemed to be giving way, the waters were roaring, and the mountains were being cast into the sea (cf. Ps. 46:2-3). In such times of personal distress we need peace in our lives, and it is this about which Philippians 4:6-7 is speaking.

But we must ask for it! This is because Philippians 4:6-7 is about prayer —"prayer and petition, with thanksgiving" by which we "present [our] requests to God." The promise is that if we will do that, laying all our troubles, worries, and anxieties before God, then a peace which is manifestly beyond all human understanding will possess us. The hymn writer said,

> What a friend we have in Jesus,
> All our sins and griefs to bear!
> What a privilege to carry
> Everything to God in prayer!
> O what peace we often forfeit,
> O what needless pain we bear,
> All because we do not carry
> Everything to God in prayer.

I find it significant that Paul's second benediction, which is a prayer that the God of all peace might be with the Christians at Rome, follows immediately upon his request for prayer from them. They are to pray, but he is praying too. So should we! We should pray for peace ourselves *and* for one another.

Part Twenty-Two. Final Greetings

Chapter 232.
Phoebe, a Deaconess

Romans 16:1-2

The last chapter of Romans contains the names of many people in Rome, to whom Paul was writing, as well as those who were in Corinth with Paul and who joined him in sending greetings—thirty-three names in all. Twenty-four of these people were in Rome. Nine were in Corinth. But there are also two unnamed women and an unspecified number of unnamed men. Far from being an uninteresting listing, this chapter is actually one of the most fascinating of the New Testament.

One fascinating thing about Romans 16 is what it reveals about Paul. Some have the idea that people who are interested in ideas—in this case those who study Christian theology—are not interested in people. They are supposed to immerse themselves in books. They are not "relational," as we say. There are people like this, of course. But Paul is a refutation of the idea that those who are interested in doctrine cannot be interested in those for whom the doctrine has been given. No one could be more interested in the great truths of God than Paul. The entire Epistle to the Romans has been an unfolding of them. But here we see that Paul was also intensely interested in people. In fact, to judge by this chapter, Paul can be said to show more interest in people than anyone else in the Bible except Jesus.

Another lesson from this chapter is brought out by Leon Morris in his commentary:

[Romans] was not written to professional theologians (though through the centuries scholars have found the epistle a happy hunting ground). As we consider the weighty matters Paul deals with, we are apt to

overlook the fact that it was addressed to people like Ampliatus and Tryphena and Rufus. Clearly Paul expected this kind of person to be helped by what he wrote, a fact which modern experts sometimes overlook. And it is fitting that this letter, which has given us so much solid doctrinal teaching, should end with this emphasis on persons, on love, and on a reminder that humble servants of God perform all sorts of active ministry.

The Bearer of the Letter

The first of these many persons whom Paul mentions is Phoebe. We do not know anything more about her than what we are told here, but we are told several important facts, and there is also solid ground for some additional helpful speculation.

What seems most likely, because of the way she is commended to the church, is that Phoebe was the bearer of the letter to the church at Rome. If we analyze the chapter, we will see that verses 3-16 refer to people at Rome to whom the apostle sends greetings, and that verses 21-24 refer to people who were at Corinth who sent their greetings with Paul. Phoebe stands apart, at the head of this chapter, as one who was obviously traveling to Rome and is therefore commended to the good graces of the Roman Christians. Since she is the only one so commended, it is reasonable to think that she was the one who carried the letter. In the ancient world letters were always sent by individual persons, for there was no postal service outside of the military.

What Paul asks the Christians at Rome to do is "to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me." In other words, they were being asked to receive and help Phoebe in exactly the same manner Paul had indicated that he would like to be helped when he would get to Rome himself (see Rom. 15:24).

This woman bore a pagan name. Phoebe is the feminine form of Phoibos, a name given to the god Apollo. But Phoebe had become a

Christian, was a true "servant" of the church at Cenchrea, and had helped many people, including Paul.

Here is a point at which we may speculate a bit. It was not very safe for a woman to travel alone in the ancient world, so Phoebe probably had people with her. But it is Phoebe who is mentioned and not these other persons—not even a husband—so we are probably right to suppose that she was single and a prominent woman. She must have been wealthy too, because it took money to travel. She was probably like Lydia of Philippi, a dealer in purple cloth who was converted through Paul's preaching and then opened her house to Paul and the other new Christians (Acts 16:13-15).

What a wonderful treasure Phoebe carried in her hands. She had been a servant to the church in
Cenchrea, the eastern port of the city of Corinth. In this service she became an even greater servant to the church at all times and in all places. Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, "Never was there a greater burden carried by such tender hands. The theological history of the church through the centuries was in the manuscript which she brought with her. The Reformation was in that baggage. The blessing of multitudes in our day was carried in those parchments."

Was Phoebe a Deaconess?

Was Phoebe a deaconess—that is, an elected or appointed officer of the church at Cenchrea? This question arises because the word for deacon is the same Greek word as *servant,* and this is the word used of Phoebe in verse 1: "Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea." The King James Version of the Bible translates the word as *servant.* The Revised Standard Version renders it *deaconess.* The New International Version reads *servant* but adds *or deaconess* as a text note. Without any real justification, the New English Bible has the words "who holds office in the congregation at Cenchrea."

The reason for these various translations is that the word itself is ambiguous. It means servant generally and broadly, but it can also mean

deacon or deaconess in a narrower or restricted sense. Only the context can determine how it should be taken, and there is not enough said in Romans 16:1 to be decisive.

As I have looked over what has been written on this question in various commentaries, I have received the impression that judgments, where they occur, come more from the age or ecclesiastical tradition of the writers than from the word *diakonos* itself. For example, John Murray writes, "If Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from verse 2, then she would be a servant of the church and there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate." Murray was from a church tradition that did not ordain women. On the other hand, Leon Morris says, "The social conditions of the time were such that there must have been the need for feminine church workers to assist in such matters as the baptism of women or anything that meant contact with women's quarters in homes. The form of expression here makes it more likely that an official is meant than the more general term 'servant,'..."

The bottom line is that the text itself is not decisive, and a judgment on this question must be made on other grounds. In my judgment, based on 1 Timothy 2:12, there are two limitations placed on the function of women in the church: (1) an authoritative teaching position and (2) an authoritative disciplining position. Those seem to me to be restricted to male leaders, functioning together in what the Presbyterian tradition calls a session. But aside from that restriction there is no office or service in the church in which women may not perform.

Again I quote Barnhouse:

What we owe to [women] in the Sunday school and in the work among women, is shown by the devotion to the Lord of those whom he has called to direct his work. We remember that a group of women followed the Lord Jesus Christ when he was here on earth, for we read that, in addition to the twelve, there were "certain women which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of

whom went seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance" (Luke 8:2-3). And to this day, the faithful ministration of such women makes possible a vast amount of the missionary activity of the church throughout the world.

At Tenth Presbyterian Church we have women serve as deaconesses, in the Sunday school, and on all our committees, with the sole exception of the session, and we encourage them to do so.

But let's step back from the concern for the place of women in society that has been raised for those in our day and notice that our questions were not even being raised in the New Testament era. They are not in Paul's mind as he wraps up Romans, for example, or he would have made his position on church offices clear. Why wasn't this an issue? The answer is not that the apostles were not concerned with women or the exercise of their gifts. Obviously they were. That is why they are mentioned so often, as here. The answer is that the New Testament leaders were just not as deeply concerned with office, as we are. Instead they were concerned with normal Christian behavior or functions. What they cared about was that Christian people should actually be the servants of others, as Jesus was, not whether they had a badge saying, "I am a *servant* [deacon or deaconess] of the church."

A Ministry of Service

Service is a necessary function of those who call themselves Christians, and every Christian should be a deaconess or deacon in this sense.

I have been helped in this area by some studies on the role of the diaconate done by George C.
Fuller, a minister in the Presbyterian Church of America and a former president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Although he was concerned with the forms of service peculiar to deacons, Fuller began with an emphasis on the service ministry of each believer in Christ. He pointed out that the world measures greatness by the service a person receives. In business the "important" people are

those at the top of the organizational pyramid. The bigger the organization, the more important the top person is. In personal affairs the "great" are those who have servants, and the greater the number of servants, the greater the great one is perceived to be. Jesus reversed all that. He turned the whole thing upside down, making, as it were, "the first last and the last first." In God's eyes, greatness consists not in the number of people who serve us but in the number of people we serve. The greater the number, the better the Christian.

Fuller wrote, "If Jesus had not taken upon himself the 'form of a servant,' if the Lord of glory had not 'humbled himself and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross,' the world's standard would have remained unchallenged." But Jesus challenged it. Now "he is *the* 'deacon,' our ultimate example, and in fulfilling that charge from God he assured power for his people, his body on earth, to do his ministry."

So why do we have official deacons and deaconesses? The reason is that we need people to lead the way in several ministries in which every believer in Jesus Christ should be engaged.

1. *A ministry of mercy.* The first is "the ministry of mercy," the chief service for which the office of deacon was established. You will recall that deacons came into being as a result of the situation described in Acts 6:1-7. There were many poor Christians in Jerusalem. Some Christians had a surplus of goods and gave to assist these poor people. A dispute arose between the Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Jews about a perceived unequal distribution of these resources. The Greek-speaking Jews, the Hellenists, complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. This threatened to divide the church. So after they had prayed about the problem and sought God's direction, the apostles counseled the church to select seven men "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" and place this important service in their hands.

The church did this, choosing Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas (v. 5). Judging from their names, these

men were all from the Greek-speaking community. So the congregation chose wisely, the food was properly distributed, and the office of deacon was born.

2. *Evangelism.* Another ministry of deacons is evangelism, which arises naturally out of their other work. The first two of the deacons mentioned in Acts 6 are examples. Philip is called "the evangelist" in Acts 21:8. God used him to take the gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8:5) and later to an Ethiopian nobleman (Acts 8:26-40). He had a gift for what we would call cross-cultural evangelism. Stephen preached with great power before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the same body that had condemned Jesus. In fact, his preaching brought such conviction to these corrupt religious leaders that they killed him too. So he became the first martyr of the church.

3. *Training others.* A third work of the deacons and deaconess is to train others. Some will do this by direct and explicit teaching; all must do it by example.

It is good to remember that in our Lord's parable of the sheep and the goats, told just before his arrest and crucifixion, it was the presence or absence of genuine service to others that marked the corresponding presence or absence of a saving relationship to him. What was done to and for others was regarded as a service to himself:

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When

did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Matthew 25:34-40

The Church, God's Family

The church of Jesus Christ is meant to be one large and very caring family. The word *church* appears here, in verse 1, for the first time in Romans. It occurs five times in this chapter (vv. 1, 4, 5, 16, 23), where Paul is beginning to write about individual members of the Roman and Corinthian congregations.

It is not the only word for the body of believers, either. Paul calls these Christians *brothers* and *sisters* (Phoebe is "our sister"), *saints, fellow workers, friends, a mother* in one case, and those who are *in the Lord.* What ties these references together is that they regard those who are in Christ as members of a spiritual family. Therefore, the matter is important to Paul, and he emphasizes that these believers belong to each other and serve each other selflessly, without any regard to titles, just as members of a happy and well-functioning family might do.

These people have titles, but not the kind the world would care very much to possess. Barnhouse calls these titles epitaphs, because these people are gone now and are remembered only because of the words Paul spoke over them as he sent this letter to Rome:

Let us look through this chapter to see the designations of these shadowy figures who walk against the gray stones of ancient Rome. Phoebe is called a servant of the church, a helper of many. What an epitaph! How much can be said in a single sentence. I begin to think of single sentences that described a complete life of a person. For many weeks I glanced at the obituary columns of the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London. It was not long before I had quite a list. "A writer on food and wines" is the sentence left behind by one man. "Developer of

trotting races" summed up the life of another. Still another "introduced modern conditions for bottling beer."...

In contrast to this, glance through the closing chapter of Romans and read these lines of description. Servant (v. 1), helper (v. 2), fellow workers (vv. 3, 9), four people who are called beloved (vv. 5, 8, 9, 12), two called hard workers (vv. 6, 12), fellow prisoners, men of note among the apostles (v. 7), approved in Christ (v. 10), workers in the Lord (v. 12), eminent (v. 13), a mother to me (v. 13), saints (v. 15). What epitaphs are these! How much greater than the piles of stone that emperors heaped together to preserve their memory. The Colosseum and the Pantheon are great buildings built by two of the emperors, but who knows their names? And if I tell you that one of them was built by Hadrian and the other by Vespasian, who but a few history teachers knows which was which?

But when all the stones have turned to sand, and when the elements melt in fervent heat, and Rome, supposedly eternal, is seen to be the quintessence of that which is temporal, these humble people, beloved, hard workers, and saints, will burst forth in the brilliance of the truly eternal city "which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

We do not pray to these saints; they cannot hear us. But, feeling our oneness with them, we know the true communion of saints and wait for that day when we, with them, shall be caught up together to meet our Lord when he comes (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

As Barnhouse did at the close of that chapter of his studies, so I also look back over the years of my life and think of the Christian people who have helped me along the way. Most of them would be unknown to you, and I do not know any who have been much honored by the world. But I think of them and give them these titles: Encourager, Teacher, Counselor, Fellow Worker, Friend, Companion. I know I am not remembering them all. But they are known to their Master in heaven, and they will not fail of their reward. Thank God for these great servants of his. May we be like them.

Chapter 233.
The Apostle Who Did Not Forget

Romans 16:3-16

In the last chapter of Romans Paul is thinking about other people, not about himself. But we can hardly read the chapter without thinking seriously about him.

What a remarkable person Paul was! He possessed one of the greatest intellects of all time, right up there with Plato and Aristotle. But unlike those two outstanding Greeks, Paul was not merely a thinker and teacher. He was also the first great propagandist for Christianity, a pioneer missionary with a truly global vision. And he persevered in this vision even though it meant great personal discomfort and hardships. He tells us in one place that he endured "troubles, hardships and distresses... beatings, imprisonments and riots... hard work, sleepless nights and hunger" (2 Cor. 6:4-5). Yet in spite of such troubles he persevered in the task he believed God had given him to do and by God's grace made a more lasting and beneficial impact upon this world than any mere human being who has ever lived. Only the Lord Jesus Christ was more influential.

Sometimes people with this kind of intellectual ability and drive are hard to get close to, but it is to Paul's credit that he was not at all like that. One commentator rightly says of him, "He was never, for a moment, a professional Christian." He cared for people. What drove him was his love for his Savior and his consuming passion that others might come to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ too.

Friends and Fellow Workers

We have a remarkable picture of this great apostle in Romans 16. It emerges in the way he sends his greetings to more than twenty-four people in Rome. When we remember that Paul had never been in Rome, that there was no postal service for civilians, no telephones or faxes that could have given him quick information about what was going on or

who was doing what, it is remarkable that he knew so many people who were there and such a lot about them.

How did he get to know them? And how did he know so many details about their lives? There were two ways. Either these were people he had gotten to know in the long course of his missionary work and then had kept track of, following them in his mind as they left Ephesus, Corinth, or wherever and relocated to Rome, or they were people in Rome whom he had learned about from those who had come to him from that city, like Priscilla and Aquila. As we read over this list of names, we find that Paul knew most of these people personally, which means that most were people he had met in his missionary travels. Either he had led these people to Christ or they had worked with him or he had been imprisoned with them for Christ's sake. Paul loved them all. So he kept track of them and followed what happened to them in their work and travels.

We have telephones and good mail service and other modern means of quick communication. But I doubt that there are many of us who could name twenty-four people in another city, not to mention one we have never visited—people who are believers and whom we remember and support regularly in our prayers.

The Christians at Rome

When we begin to look into these names and what Paul says about them, we find a remarkable picture of life in the early church. In fact, it is one of the best early pictures of the church we have, with the possible exception of the church in Jerusalem described in Acts.

1. *Priscilla and Aquila.* Not many of the people in these lists are known to us in any way apart from what Paul says of them here. Priscilla and Aquila are an exception, because they are mentioned six different places in the New Testament. We learn from these scattered references that Aquila was a Jew from Pontus who had settled in Rome but had been forced to leave Rome, together with his wife, Priscilla, when the Emperor Claudius had expelled the

Jews from the capital (Acts 18:2). Aquila was a tentmaker, which was Paul's occupation too. This is what brought them together when Paul had to work in Corinth to support himself during this period of his missionary outreach. When Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, this couple went with him but then stayed on in Ephesus, where they were used "more adequately" to explain the gospel to an influential orator and (later) effective Christian worker named Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). By the time Paul wrote this letter they had returned to Rome.

Aquila and Priscilla had a sound knowledge of the gospel, great ability, and outstanding courage, and they were well known to the churches at Rome and elsewhere, judging by what Paul writes. He calls them his fellow workers, adding that they risked their lives for him and that "all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them." We do not know how they risked their lives for Paul, but it may have been at Ephesus when the mob led by the makers of idols of the goddess Diana were rioting.

Priscilla and Aquila had a group of believers meeting in their house. They had opened their home to similar congregations earlier, at Corinth (see 1 Cor. 16:19) and probably in Ephesus. In these days Christians mostly met in private homes, and there were probably many house churches in Rome.

2. *Epenetus.* Epenetus, whom Paul mentions next, was Paul's friend. He calls him "my dear friend," adding that he was "the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia." Since Paul was the first to evangelize Asia, this can only mean that Paul had led Epenetus to Christ. No wonder Paul did not forget him! You always remember those you lead to Christ, especially the first man or woman.

3. *Mary.* There are many Marys in the New Testament, especially the Gospels, but there is no reason to associate this Mary with any of them. Paul says that Mary "worked very hard for you," which means that she was from Rome. Paul had probably been told about her by Aquila and Priscilla, who had come to Corinth about the

time Paul had first arrived there. Literally Paul's words mean "Mary the toiler." She may have been one of the earliest members of the Roman church, and her toil may have been largely responsible for its spiritual and organizational wellbeing. Mary bore no title, but she had the gift of helps (see 1 Cor. 12:28), and Paul is careful to remember those who exercise such service.

4. *Andronicus and Junias.* Paul says four things about these two people: (1) they were his relatives, (2) they had been in prison with him, (3) they were outstanding among the apostles, and (4) they were in Christ before he was.

This is quite remarkable. Calling them his relatives could mean that they were members of his own extended family, but it probably does not. Like other similar references (see v. 11), it probably means only that they were Jews. They had become Christians before he did, however, and this means that they must have gone back to the very earliest days of the infant church in Jerusalem. Interestingly, here are Jews from the very early days of the church who were now in Rome and were part of the congregation there.

The phrase "outstanding among the apostles" is ambiguous. It could mean that they were apostles who were outstanding, or that the apostles considered them to be outstanding. In the first case, Paul would be using the word *apostles* in a less than strict sense to indicate those who are messengers of or for Jesus Christ It is possible that the name Junias (NIV) is actually Junia, which being a feminine form of the same name might mean that these two people were husband and wife and that Junia is therefore being commended along with her husband as an outstanding "apostle," in the broad sense, of course. John Chrysostom believed Junia was indeed a woman and was impressed enough to say, "Oh! how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle." As we saw in the last study, Paul did not belittle women but praised them highly.

5. *Ampliatus.* Ampliatus was a common slave name, but it may be significant that in the cemetery of Domatilla, which is the earliest

of the Christian catacombs, there is an elaborate tomb with the single word *Ampliatus* on it. Since it bears only the one name, it seems to mark the tomb of a slave—free men had more than one name—but since it is elaborate it seems to be the tomb of an important person in the church. In other words, in the Roman church there were no distinctions based upon whether one was a slave or free. It may also be possible, since Ampliatus is associated with Domatilla, who was a woman of high status in Rome, that this is an example of how Christianity penetrated by degrees into even the highest levels of Roman rank and society.

6. *Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, and Herodion.* Verses 9-11 mention four men of whom we know nothing other than what Paul tells us here. Urbanus is called a "fellow worker." Stachys is "my dear friend," like Epenetus. Apelles is "tested and approved in Christ." Herodion, like

Andronicus and Junias, is called Paul's "relative." It is worth noting that Apelles means called. So putting everything we know about him together, we have one who is "called, tested, and approved in Christ." What a testimony! What a fine thing to be said about any one of us!

7. *The households of Aristobulus and Narcissus.* Neither Aristobulus nor Narcissus is greeted personally by Paul, which is why we count twenty-four names of those Paul knew, rather than twenty-six. Paul speaks only of their households, yet even these households are interesting.

In Rome the word *household* did not only describe a man's family and close relations; it included his household domestics or slaves as well. Now in Rome there had lived a grandson of the Jewish king Herod the Great whose name was Aristobulus. When he died his slaves would have passed to the ownership of the emperor and would have been known as those of "the household of Aristobulus." Thus, Paul's greeting may well be to those Jewish slaves who belonged to this household but who had become Christians and were members of the Roman church. This is made more likely because of the name Herodion, which follows

Aristobulus. Herodion is clearly derived from Herod, so he may have been one of the leading slaves in this household.

Narcissus is the name of a wealthy freedman who had been prominent under Claudius but had been put to death by Nero when he took the throne. Again, there seem to have been a significant number of believers in this household.

8. *Tryphena and Tryphosa.* These two female names come from a root that means "to live delicately or daintily," so Paul may be using positive irony when he commends "Delicate" and "Dainty" for actually working hard. None of us should be dainty in practice as long as God has rigorous work for us to do.

9. *Persis.* When Paul wrote about Tryphena and Tryphosa working hard in the Lord he used the present tense, which meant that they were still working. Here he uses the past tense, translated "who has worked very hard" in the New International Version. This probably means that Persis was old; her hardworking days were over. Yet although she could no longer work as she once had, what she did was remembered and she was highly regarded. Paul calls her "my dear friend," actually "the beloved."

10. *Rufus and his mother.* William Barclay says that one of the great "hidden romances" of the New Testament lies behind the name of Rufus and his mother. Who was this Rufus? If you look up his name in a concordance, you will find that a Rufus is mentioned in Mark 15:21. That chapter tells the story of Christ's crucifixion, and it mentions that a Cyrenian man named Simon was forced to carry Christ's cross when Jesus was too weak to do it. Mark says that Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why would he mention that? He would if Alexander and Rufus were well known. Add to this the fact that Mark's Gospel was written for the church at Rome especially, and we have not only the reason why Mark would mention these men but also a probable identification of Paul's Rufus. Quite possibly he was the son of the man who carried Christ's cross.

What a story lies hidden here! Simon was a Jew who, like all Jews, would have hated the Romans. To be pressed into service by a Roman soldier and be forced to carry the cross of a condemned man must have been a hateful, bitter experience for him. But something important may have happened to Simon that day. Instead of merely flinging down the cross at Golgotha, Simon must have been struck by the person of Jesus, stayed to watch the crucifixion, and eventually been converted, perhaps by the same elements that God used to reach the heart of the believing thief. After the Passover he would have returned home to Cyrene and would have told his family about Jesus. They may have become Christians through his testimony.

William Barclay goes even farther, remembering that "it was men from Cyprus and Cyrene" who came to Antioch and first preached the gospel to the Gentile world (Acts 11:20). Was Simon one of the men from Cyrene? Was Rufus with him? Turn to Ephesus. A riot is instigated by people who served Diana of the Ephesians, and the crowd would have killed Paul if they could have gotten to him. Barclay writes, "Who stands out to look that mob in the face? A man called Alexander (Acts 19:33). Is this the other brother facing things out with Paul? And as for their mother—surely she in some hour of need must have brought to Paul the help and the comfort and the love which his own family refused him when he became a Christian."

Much of this is only speculation, of course, but stranger histories have unfolded. It may be that this happened as a result of an apparently chance encounter between Simon and Jesus on the road to Calvary.

11. *Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers with them.* We know nothing about this group of people except for what Paul tells us here, and that is not much. Apparently these were men who in some way lived or worked together. Ray Stedman calls them "a businessmen's group." They may have been slaves of one man or have become freedmen together. Since there are brothers mentioned with them, this may be another reference to a house church.

12. *Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them.* The most interesting name in this final collection is Nereus. Here again William Barclay provides intriguing information. In a.d. 95 two of the most distinguished people in Rome were condemned for being Christians. They were husband and wife, and their names were Flavius Clemens and Domatilla, the woman who gave her name to the earliest Christian graveyard in Rome. Flavius was executed. Domatilla was banished to the island of Pontia, probably because she was of royal blood. She was the granddaughter of Vespasian, a former emperor, and the niece of Domitian, who was the reigning emperor. The name of this couple's chamberlain, a personal steward who in some cases handled his master's finances, was Nereus.

We do not know, of course, if this is the same Nereus, but it may be that this was the very person through whom the gospel of God's grace entered this prominent Roman household and eventually led to the martyrdoms that doubtless shocked and troubled Rome.

Not to Be Forgotten

When we look back over this chapter we begin to get a sense of how close these people were to Paul, though they were hundreds of miles away, and how much he loved them. For he calls them beloved and praises them for their faithful service to him and one another and for their labor in the Lord.

Do you love other Christians like that, especially people who are not quite like you? Some believers are bookish, working away in libraries in order to understand the Bible better and be more able to explain it to others. Other Christians are visible, popular figures. Some are quiet and self-effacing. Some are loud, enthusiastic, or even awkward in the way they express their Christianity. Some love somber liturgy. Others speak in tongues. No matter! They are all members of the one body of Jesus Christ and should be loved and appreciated by all others who are true

Christians. They should be loved by you, if you are following in the footsteps of the apostle Paul in this area.

How did Paul come to know and actually love so many Christians? How did he remember them all? Chiefly because he was thinking about them rather than about himself. I think of the way he handled the delicate situation in Corinth when conflicting loyalties to himself, Peter, and Apollos threatened to divide that church. Paul told the Corinthians, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow" (1 Cor. 3:5-6). It is this spirit, a spirit that appreciates and values the work of the other Christian, even more than one's own, that flows through Paul's writings.

We need to be like him in this. We need to think about other people much more than we do, instead of always thinking of ourselves. Try making a list of people who have done something for you to bring you closer to Christ or whom God has used you to bless. Write down what they did and begin to thank God for them. If you can't think of anybody, at least start serving others so they will add you to *their list* of people not to be forgotten.

Chapter 234.
A Sudden Warning

Romans 16:17-19

Romans is not the longest book in the Bible, or even the New Testament, but it is long for a letter, and Paul has taken a long time ending it. After all, of sixteen chapters fully one and a half contain Paul's final greetings. He seemed to be ending when he commended Phoebe to the Roman church and sent greetings to these he knew who were in Rome, but then suddenly, in the middle of what appears to be his final comments, he breaks in with a completely unexpected warning

about people who might "cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Rom. 16:17).

This warning is so sudden, unexpected, and sharp that some commentators consider it to be an interpolation—something added to the letter later by someone other than Paul. But to approach the paragraph this way is to miss how much Paul loved the Roman church, even though he had not yet been able to visit it, and how concerned he was that something harmful might enter into it to spoil the church and its witness.

Besides, his warning is not really unrelated to what he has just said. Leon Morris suggests that these verses may have been added as a thoughtful response to mentioning the kiss of peace in the previous verse. Paul might have thought how easy it would be for that existing harmony to be disrupted. Or they might have come into his mind as a result of his mentioning the churches he knew and from which he sends greetings in the same verse. Paul knew the problems that had developed in other churches. His letters are full of material dealing with such problems. Recalling them would suggest the troubles that might disrupt the Roman congregation in the future. Or perhaps Paul had received some disturbing reports from Rome just as he was bringing the letter to the Romans to a close.

What we do know is that his fears were not groundless. When he finally did get to Rome he found precisely what he had warned them against. Paul wrote to the Philippians, saying, "Some [here] preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains" (Phil. 1:15-17).

Boars in God's Vineyard

At the height of the Reformation, when Martin Luther was challenging the corruptions of the medieval church by a rediscovery of sound biblical exegesis and preaching, Pope Leo X issued a papal bull against

Luther that complained that "a wild boar is ravishing God's vineyard." Luther was not doing that, of course. He was more like an Old Testament prophet, recalling a wayward church to its apostolic roots. But wild boars really have ravished the church from time to time, and that is what Paul is warning about here. He warns against two specific things.

1. *Those who cause divisions.* What Paul has in mind when he speaks of "those who cause divisions" is not so much people who introduce heresies into the church, though this also sometimes happens, but those who divide churches into factions that will be loyal to themselves.

Often these are people who show up in a congregation suddenly, usually from another church where they have also caused trouble, though they give no indication of that when they come. They are knowledgeable. They usually have considerable abilities. They are leaders in the sense that they have enthusiasm and get people to follow them easily. Generally they are used to teaching, and they want to fill this role in their new church. Unfortunately, although the Bible warns us to make full proof of those who want to be teachers, people like this are usually warmly welcomed and quickly put to work, because most churches need able people who actually want to serve.

But problems develop quickly. These new teachers begin to push a particular point of doctrine to the exclusion of other equally important truths. And they are critical of people who do not see things as they do or join them in pushing their personal concerns. When everyone does not go their way—and not all people do, because God always has some in any church who are not so easily taken in, who care for other believers and who are not serving themselves—these unbalanced and divisive teachers pull most of their followers away and start another fellowship. That fellowship is always presented as a more biblical, more faithful, or truer church.

The names of some churches point back to such an origin. They are *"The* Christian Church" or the only *"Full* Gospel Church" or "The *True*

Light Gospel Church." I have even seen such names as "The Original Glorious Church" and "Holy Ghost Headquarters." Fortunately, some of these churches mature into less factional and stronger congregations when the founder moves on.

2. *Those who put obstacles in other persons' ways.* The other danger Paul warns the Roman church against is those who "put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned." The word Paul uses here is *skandalon*, from which we get our word "scandal." He is not thinking of scandalous behavior, though that is also often a problem, but rather of adding things to the gospel that get in the way of those who are merely trying to obey the Bible and follow Jesus Christ.

This is what the Pharisees of Jesus' day were doing and why he spoke so harshly against them. The Pharisees imposed all kinds of extreme, extrabiblical requirements on their disciples. They required hundreds of detailed points of Sabbath observance, strict controls on diet, and the observance of many holy or otherwise special days. Jesus said of them, "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see" (Matt. 23:4-5). He also admonished them directly, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to" (Matt. 23:13).

People like this do not deny the essentials of the Christian faith, but they bring in other things that are not in the Bible and insist on conformity in these areas. In the Greek text of this verse Paul uses the words *para*, which means along side of, and *didachê*, which means teaching. So what he is thinking of is those who put some other teaching alongside of what is taught in Scripture.

Because these matters are not specified in Scripture, it is not necessarily wrong for a Christian to practice them. For example, it is acceptable for a Christian to adopt particular ways of observing the Lord's Day or certain standards of dress that he believes point to Jesus Christ or

glorify Christ. What is wrong is attempting to impose these standards on other believers and then dividing the church because some Christians will not conform to them.

It is important to remember Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." This is the climactic verse of Paul's great treatise on Christian liberty, and it teaches that we must not allow ourselves to be taken into bondage by anyone.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Paul has some rather harsh things to say about people who divide the church over minor matters or insist that other Christians conform to their personal standards of behavior, thus adding to the teaching of Christ. His harsh judgments concern both the motivation behind their actions and their basic methodology.

1. *Their motivation.* When people such as the ones Paul is describing first enter into a Christian congregation, they come as angels of light. That is, they present themselves as teachers who want to instruct and help other believers and move the church forward. They care for them. They want them to experience the fullness of God's blessing.

But this is not what they achieve, nor is it what they are really after. Paul says they really want to serve "their own appetites," not Jesus Christ. What are these appetites? John MacArthur answers, "No matter how seemingly sincere and caring false teachers or preachers may appear to be, they are never genuinely concerned for the cause of Christ or for his church. They are often driven by self-interest and self-gratification—sometimes for fame, sometimes for power over their followers, always for financial gain, and frequently for all of those reasons. Many of them enjoy pretentious and luxurious life-styles, and sexual immorality is the rule more than the exception."

These are sometimes pastors who dominate their congregations, or evangelists who make a great deal of money and live lavishly on the

many sacrificial gifts of their followers.

These teachers are described in Philippians and Jude: "Many live as enemies of the cross of
Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things" (Phil. 3:18-19). "These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever" (Jude 12-13). No wonder Paul warned the Romans against such false teachers in strong terms.

2. *Their methodology.* The second thing Paul says about teachers like this concerns their methodology. They operate by deception, deliberately setting out to deceive the unwary: "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (v. 18). The New International Version's "smooth talk" captures the idea behind the Greek word *chrêstologia*, but it is useful to note that this compound Greek word is based on the noun *logos*, meaning word or talk, preceded by the adjective *chrêstos*, meaning kind, loving, merciful, or easy to bear. In other words, the term refers to moral talk that appears to be kind and loving. Therefore, it requires a wise person to discern what is going on. We must discern that these people are not what they appear to be.

Apostles of Deceit

It is hard to read what Paul is writing about here without thinking of two recent books: *The*
Agony of Deceit, edited by Michael Scott Horton, and *Christianity in Crisis*, by radio host Hank Hanegraaff. Both examine the false teaching of the best-known television evangelists, faith healers, and "health, wealth, and happiness" preachers. These men have been wildly successful in many cases, raking in millions of dollars from their

followers. But they have been guilty of precisely the kind of deception Paul was warning the Romans against—smooth talk and flattery.

1. *Special revelations.* Virtually all these teachers pretend to have received special new revelations from God. Robert Tilton built a television empire that at its peak brought in over sixty-five million dollars a year, promising healing to people who would covenant with him by sending in a large financial gift. He claimed, "God showed me a vision that almost took my breath away. I was sucked into the Spirit... and I found myself standing in the very presence of Almighty God.... He said these words to me, exactly these words." At that point he introduced the plan by which he would raise money. Fortunately, Tilton's empire has fallen on financial hard times since ABC's *Prime Time Live* showed how his listeners' prayer requests were first stripped of money, then quickly disposed of in huge dumpsters.

2. *Little gods.* These preachers tell their followers that they are "little gods." Paul Crouch said on a Trinity Broadcasting Network program, "We are gods. I am a little god. I have his name. I am one with him." Casey Treat, the pastor of Seattle's Christian Faith Center, said, "When God looks in the mirror, he sees me! When I look in the mirror, I see God!" Kenneth Hagin, another faith healer, said, "You are as much the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ was." Morris Cerullo said, "You're not looking at Morris Cerullo—you're looking at God. You're looking at Jesus."

3. *A merely human Christ.* Surprisingly, because it is utterly contradictory, some of these false teachers deny that Jesus Christ is fully God. Kenneth Copeland claims to have heard Jesus say, "I didn't claim I was God; I just claimed I walked with him and that he was in me.... That's what you're doing."

4. *Demoting God.* These teachers also limit God. Kenneth Copeland said, "God cannot do anything for you apart or separate from faith" because "faith is God's source of power." Frederick Price declared, "God has to be given permission to work in this earth realm on

behalf of man.... Yes! You are in control!... When God gave Adam dominion, that meant God no longer had dominion. So, God cannot do anything in this earth unless we let him. And the way we let him or give him permission is through prayer."

5. *Gospel of greed.* This false teaching tells people how God wants them to get rich and how being poor is sinful. Frederick Price says, "If the Mafia can ride around in Lincoln Continental town cars, why can't the King's Kids?" Robert Tilton said, "Not only is worrying a sin, being poor is a sin when God promises prosperity." How different from the Son of Man, who did not even have "a place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20).

These quotations are enough to show how heretical the evangelists I have just named are. Christians should be appalled at such teaching. Yet thousands of people who consider themselves to be sincere spiritual Christians apparently do not know that this is false, or choose to ignore it. Otherwise they would not give these men millions of dollars or recommend that others watch their programs.

What are we to call this teaching? Heresy, yes. But also deliberate deception. In some cases, as in that of some faith healers, their deception has been documented. Peter Popoff is a southern California-based evangelist. During a large crusade in which he claimed to have supernatural knowledge of the names and ailments of several people in the audience a shrewd member of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion named James Randi used a radio scanner to pick up the frequency on which Popoff's wife was broadcasting information to him. She fed him names, illnesses, and addresses of people in the audience to whom she had previously spoken. In the spring of 1986 Randi made his findings public on NBC's *The Tonight Show*.

This is a modern-day parallel to what took place in the Garden of Eden when Satan deceived Eve by promising that if she and her husband disobeyed God and followed Satan they would be "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Of course, they already were like God,

because they had been made in God's image (see Gen. 1:26-27). After they sinned, Adam and Eve actually became like Satan, who knew evil because he practiced it.

Have Nothing to Do with Them

Not all deceivers and flatterers in the church are this obvious, but they still pose a terrible threat to true Christian people and congregations. Paul gives an answer to what should be done about them in this important paragraph in Romans. It is a simple bit of advice. Yet before we notice what it is, we need to see what it is not. Notice that the Roman Christians were not told to harm the heretics physically, as many church leaders did in the Middle Ages. They were not to have witch trials or burn heretics at the stake. More surprisingly, they were not told to debate the false teachers, to try to prove them wrong.

Quite simply, they were "to watch out for" them and "keep away from them" (v. 17). Then, as if to explain what he is talking about, Paul says, "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (v. 19). Put in today's terms, this means that Christians should not watch false teachers on television. We should not buy their books or attend their meetings. We should ignore them as figures standing entirely outside the fold of genuine Christianity.

In other words, we are to know that they are there but keep away from them. The verb translated "watch out for" in verse 17 is *skopeo*, from which we get our word *scope,* as in telescope and microscope. It has given us our word *bishop*, which means an overseer.

Paul is only telling the Romans in his own words what Jesus said on the issue. Jesus told his disciples, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:15-16). He warned, "False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible" (Matt. 24:24). He also said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.

Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against [them]" (Matt. 10:16-17).

That is exactly what Paul is saying in the last verse of this section when he tells the Roman congregation, "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (v. 19). We are to know about evil, but we are not to know everything about it. We must not want to. Instead, we must fill our minds and hearts with what is good—with the doctrines of this letter, for example—and be on our guard against those who would lead us from the simplicity of what we have been taught to the deception of special revelations, new insights, novel doctrines, or movements that bow before a human teacher rather than glorify God.

Chapter 235.
The Head of Satan Crushed

Romans 16:20

One of the remarkable things about Christians is that we are able to pass rapidly and naturally from what most people regard as a merely human activity to what is spiritual. For example, we are in a gathering of friends. Everyone is talking and having a good time. We are about to sit down and eat dinner. Then suddenly we stop and pray, thanking God for the food and the opportunity to be together and asking him to bless the evening and guide our conversations in a way that will bring honor to him.

One moment we are walking down the street, enjoying the fresh balmy air of early summer. The next we are praising God as the source of life and the giver of all good things.

One moment we see some great wrong or error. The next moment we are asking God to overthrow the error. The reason we can do this is that for a Christian nothing is ever completely secular.

There is a situation like this as we come to verse 20 of Paul's closing chapter of Romans. Paul has been sending greetings to his friends in

Rome and will soon join the greetings of those who were in Corinth to his own. Nothing is more natural than this. He warns about divisions that might harm the church's close fellowship. This, too, is natural. But suddenly Paul moves out of the natural realm into the realm of spiritual realities, predicting for these Roman Christians (and for us, too) that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." This short and unexpected sentence immediately lifts what he has been saying from a merely human to a supernatural level.

Spiritual Warfare

Our world is secular and materialistic—it considers as real only what it can see or touch or measure. For our contemporaries the world is a closed system. God is eliminated. True, many people still say that they believe in God; some even believe in Satan. But spiritual beings do not matter; there is no spiritual warfare. Therefore, we are accused by our worldly contemporaries of slighting the battles that in their opinion need to be waged urgently against such visible foes as poverty, oppression, hunger, and injustice.

We do not deny for a moment that poverty, oppression, hunger, and injustice are real problems or that we should not do everything in our power to alleviate or abolish them. But we ask this: If the real problems of this world are merely material and visible, how is it that they have not been solved or eliminated long ago?

Algernon Charles Swinburne called man "the master of things." All right, then, let man master them! If he cannot—and it is perfectly evident that he cannot—let him acknowledge that it is because forces stronger than himself stand behind what is visible. Let him acknowledge that our struggle is not merely against flesh and blood, which we see, but "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12).

Paul was acutely aware of the cosmic nature of our struggle, so it is as natural as breathing for him to mention it in closing his letter to the

Romans.

Three Surprises in One Statement

Leon Morris in his commentary calls Romans 16:20 "a little devotional section with a prophecy and a prayer for grace." It is that. But it is a remarkable statement too, and one thing that makes it remarkable—in addition to the cosmic dimensions that I have been writing about—is that it contains three surprising statements, all in one sentence.

1. *That the God of peace should crush anyone.* This is surprising because crushing seems ruthless to us, and we do not easily reconcile crushing with peace or peacemaking. It does not seem to be what God or any good personality should do. How can a God of peace be belligerent?
2. *That the crushing of Satan should be under our feet.* This is surprising because Genesis 3:15, which Paul's statement obviously refers to, says that it is *Jesus* who will crush Satan: "He [that is, Jesus] will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." How then are *we* to do it?
3. *That this crushing is going to happen soon.* This is surprising because Paul's words were written to Christians in Rome nearly two thousand years ago, and Satan does not seem to be defeated yet. In fact, the world is precisely what Paul described it as being then (see Rom. 1:2832).

In the Beginning

Since Romans 16:20 is an obvious reference to the verse in Genesis 3 that prophesies Satan's defeat by Jesus Christ, we should begin with the story of the fall into sin by our first parents.

Adam and Eve had been placed in the Garden of Eden by God and had been given rule over the lower forms of the created order. They were to manage the earth for God, and they were free to do as they saw fit, with but one exception. They could eat fruit from any of the trees of the

garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told them that if they ate from it, they would die.

This was what Satan picked up on. When Satan entered the garden he approached the woman with the suggestion that if God prohibited them from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—that is, if he placed even this one, single restriction upon them—he might as well have forbidden them from eating from any of the trees. His argument was that God cannot be good, nor can he have our best interests at heart, if he makes prohibitions. We should be allowed to do anything. This, the first of Satan's temptations, was a temptation to doubt God's benevolence, and it is exactly what we have today when someone suggests that having to obey the laws of God is burdensome. We ask, If God really loves us, why doesn't he permit us to do anything we want to do?

The second temptation was to question God's truthfulness. For when the woman replied, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die,'" Satan replied with a flat contradiction. He told the woman, "You will not surely die." Whom was the woman to believe? As we know, she decided to trust her own observations and judgment rather than the Word of God, with the result that she ate from the tree and gave some to her husband so that he ate also. This is also a temptation that comes to us today, for we are always tempted to trust our own opinions, however sin-affected and unjustified they may be, rather than the Word of him who is the very embodiment of truth.

The third temptation is what actually turned Eve to disobedience. For Satan told her that God had placed the restriction on her because he did not want her and her husband to reach their full potential: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5; see vv. 1-5).

Eve apparently desired to be like God, which is what Satan had himself tried to do earlier with disastrous consequences. Now, as happened to

Satan and the angels that followed him in his rebellion, disaster came upon our first parents too. Their spirits, that part of their beings that had communion with God, died. So they hid from God when he came to them in the garden later. Their bodies began to die, and eventually they did die. For as God said in his words of punishment spoken to the man, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (v. 19). In addition, God punished the woman by subjecting her to pain in childbirth and the man by subjecting him to hard labor in order to earn a living.

But God made a promise too, and it came in the midst of his judgment upon the serpent Satan had used for his temptations. God cursed the serpent, causing him to crawl on his belly and eat dust all the days of his life. But then he said this:

> *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;*
> *he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*
> *Genesis 3:15*

This promise is known to scholars as the protoevangelium, meaning the first announcement of the gospel. It is a promise of peace with God to be achieved by Christ's work. But strikingly, like Romans 16:20, it speaks of conflict, too. There are three levels of conflict: (1) between Satan and the woman; (2) between Satan's offspring—that is, those who follow him—and the woman's offspring— that is, those who would follow in her faith; and (3) finally and most importantly, between Satan and Christ.

We know what Satan did when he was able to strike Christ's heel. He did it at the cross. It included hatred from the religious leaders, mocking by the crowds, severe beatings, and eventually the terrible agony of the crucifixion. Satan must have been delighted by every detail of his apparent triumph. Yet although Satan might have thought he had won, it was a bruising only and not a defeat for Christ, because on the third day after the crucifixion Jesus rose from the grave triumphantly.

Moreover, on the other side, Satan's triumph turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory, for by it his power over us was broken. I do not know what

Satan was thinking when he finally saw his great enemy on the cross, but I am sure he must have forgotten this prophecy with its prediction of his eventual and sure defeat. John H. Gerstner wrote of this moment:

Satan was majestically triumphant in this... battle. He had nailed Jesus to the cross. The prime object of all his striving through all the ages was achieved. But he failed. For the prophecy which had said that he would indeed bruise the seed of the woman had also said that his head would be crushed by Christ's heel. Thus, while Satan was celebrating his triumph in battle over the Son of God, the full weight of the atonement accomplished by the crucifixion (which the devil had effected) came down on him, and he realized that all this time, so far from successfully battling against the Almighty, he had actually been carrying out the purposes of the all-wise God.

Satan's only power—unlike his pretensions to power—comes from the character of God that declares that sin must be punished. His strength comes from working within the laws of that character. Satan reasoned that if he could get the man and woman to sin, which he did, the wrath of God against sin must inevitably come down on them. God's good designs would be thwarted. Satan failed to see that Jesus would take the place of sinners, bearing their punishment, and that he, Satan, would have his power broken in the process.

Paul wrote of this triumph more completely in his letter to the Colossians: "[God] forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:1315). In view of this triumph, America's great theologian Jonathan Edwards was right to call Satan the greatest blockhead the world has ever known. For although Satan is exceedingly
knowledgeable and cunning, he was also supremely stupid to suppose that he could out-think the all-wise God or overpower the Almighty.

Paul's Prophecy in Romans

Having reviewed the Old Testament story to which Paul is referring in Romans 16:20, we now need to go back to Paul to deal with the puzzling features of his statement and learn what he is teaching. Genesis 3:15 is a prophecy. So is Romans 16:20. So let's compare these two prophecies, looking at these three puzzling features.

1. *That the God of peace should crush anyone.* Our problem with this statement, as with many other statements that involve the character of God, is that we do not understand God very well. When Satan told the woman that God could not be good if he placed even a single restriction upon her and Adam, his temptation was based on our failure to understand what is good. God's goodness is not a quality that allows us to do anything at all, even if it hurts us. It is a characteristic that lays down beneficial rules according to God's moral nature.

In the same way, the peacefulness of God is not a quality that causes God to avoid all conflict or hide from hostility. It is an active attribute that makes peace where hostility existed beforehand. In Romans 16:20 God is called the "God of peace" because he makes peace by destroying the enmity between him and us in our sin, and by defeating Satan.

God makes peace in other areas also. Robert Haldane writes:

God is the God of peace, because he... is the author of all the peace that his people enjoy. Were it not for the overruling power of the Lord, his people would have no rest at any time in this world. But the Lord Jesus rules in the midst of his enemies, and he gives his people peace in the midst of their enemies. This shows us that we ought constantly to look to God for this peace. If we seek it not, but grow self-confident and secure, dangers and troubles may arise from every quarter. Our only security is God, and our duty is constantly to ask peace of him in the midst of a world of trouble.... We ought, therefore, constantly to pray for peace to God's people all over the world. We ought to pray for the peace of Jerusalem as our chief joy....

Even in the churches there would be no peace, were it not for God's presence. Such is the cunning of Satan, and the remaining ignorance and corruption of the Lord's people, that Satan would keep them in continual broils, if God did not powerfully counteract him. God is here called the God of peace, with a peculiar reference to the factious persons against whom the believers were warned in the preceding connection.

2. *That the crushing of Satan should be under our feet.* When we speak of salvation we sometimes say that we have been saved, are being saved, and one day will be saved—three tenses. In a similar way, when we speak of Jesus' victory over Satan, it is possible to say that Satan has been defeated, that he is being defeated, and that he will be defeated. The first and third of these victories has been or will be by the Lord Jesus Christ alone. We have no part in it. But we do have a part in the second of these battles, Satan's being defeated, which is why Paul can say, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

How is Satan crushed under our feet? Here is a point where the link between this text and
Genesis 3:15 is very helpful. We must remember that in the Garden of Eden Satan had come to Eve offering her and her husband the knowledge of good and evil: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). In Romans 16, in the verse immediately before our text, Paul has just told the Roman Christians, "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (v. 19). That sentence is what must have suggested the Genesis story to him and led him to write what he did in verse 20. He must have been thinking that Satan offered the knowledge of good and evil by getting Adam and Eve to do evil. Of course, they did not become like God, knowing good and evil; they became like Satan. What Paul desires of the Christians, by contrast, is that they become like God in this area, knowing and embracing the good but shunning evil, even though they will be aware of its nature and know that it is there. It is when we live like this that God will use us to crush Satan.

In other words, this crushing of Satan has to do with our victory in the sphere of the knowledge of good and evil, the same sphere in which sin first came to Eve and Adam. And it has to do with our knowing and pursuing the good, regardless of the pain Satan or his followers may cause us because of it.

In Revelation 12:11 the apostle John writes of the victory of the saints over Satan, saying, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." There are two parts to this victory: first, the victory achieved by Jesus through his death on the cross, and second, the victory won by our testimony to the truth of God. As for the latter, it is God's victory—God working in us—but it is our victory too, since it is achieved by our testimony. This is what Paul is saying in Romans, for he says that it is God who will crush Satan but that he will do it under our feet—that is, through us.

But let us not forget that we are to use God's weapons in this battle. The world has its weapons, but they are not ours. The weapons of the world are money, numbers, power, and politics. Our weapons are the Word of God and prayer: the Word of God, because it carries within it the power of God to demolish arguments and bring down strongholds; prayer, because even with the Word of God it requires the regenerating power of God to open blind minds to receive it and be persuaded of its truth.

3. *That this crushing is going to happen soon.* The word translated *soon* in Romans 16:20 has two meanings: quickly or without taking much time, and near at hand. So the prophecy that God will crush Satan soon could mean either: (1) that when he does it, it will happen quickly or (2) the victory is just around the corner. Those who choose the second meaning sometimes suggest that Paul was mistaken, since this was written almost two thousand years ago and Satan is not defeated yet.

But what is the victory about which Paul is writing? If it is what I have been suggesting—that is, the victory of believers who live by the truth of God's Word and do the right and good thing, regardless of whatever harsh consequences may come from it—then the victory is immediate, constant, widespread and absolute. For when you do the right thing,

God is glorified and Satan is shown to be a failure. This victory is complete in itself. It does not need to be added to. Nothing can diminish it or take it away.

Moreover, every victory for us like this is a promise of victories yet to come. Every act of good in this life is a victory and points to Christ's final victory. Every quiet triumph of faith over fear and pain in the hour of death is a victory, a defeat of Satan, whose ultimate but ultimately ineffective weapon is death. He has been "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). It points to the final victory of the resurrection. All trust in Christ points to faith in his return, when Satan and his angels will be totally destroyed. This is the great and final victory. It is for this that we both long and wait.

Leon Morris says that "the promise of this victorious issue [the defeat of Satan by Christ] undergirds the fight of faith." This is something we must grasp. Satan is our enemy as well as God's, and he is very fierce. But God is our champion and the ultimate victor. Martin Luther wrote wisely in that great Reformation hymn "A Mighty Fortess Is Our God":

> Did we in our own strength confide,
> Our striving would be losing;
> Were not the right man on our side,
> The man of God's own choosing.
> Dost ask who that may be?
> Christ Jesus, it is he.
> Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same
> And he must win the battle.

Chapter 236.
The Third Benediction

Romans 16:20

Christians love benedictions. They love them because they know that they are not meaningless but are based on the character of God, who is

gracious, and they are honored by God because they are prayers for the spiritual well-being of other people, which is God's desire and delight.

Paul normally ends his letters with a benediction, usually praying that those to whom he is writing might know and continue to be blessed by God's grace, as here in Romans 16:20. It is a perfect way to end these letters. For when all is said and done, what is most wonderful about God is that he is truly gracious. He has been and will continue to be. Paul has already written two earlier benedictions in this letter. In Romans 15:13 he wrote, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him." In Romans 15:33 he continued, "The God of peace be with you all. Amen." Here he says simply, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

Amazing Grace

A number of years ago I wrote a book in which I studied all the verses in the Bible that have to do with grace. By the time I had finished, I was convinced anew that the most wonderful theme in all the Word of God is God's grace.

Apparently other people have thought so too. Of all the songs that have ever been written, the one that has been recorded most by the largest number of different vocal artists is "Amazing Grace," the classic Christian hymn written in 1779 by John Newton, the former slave trader turned preacher.

> Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost but now am found— Was
> blind, but now I see.

Grace really is amazing. It is the most amazing thing in this vast universe, more amazing even than neutrons and neutrinos, quarks and quasars, and black holes. Whenever I come to a tremendous word in the Bible, one of the things I do is look in hymnbooks to see what has been written about it by Christians who have gone before me. When I did

that for grace, I was surprised by the many words for grace and the many varieties of grace that were listed.

Our church uses the *Trinity Hymnal*, which lists hymns dealing with grace under the following headings: converting grace, the covenant of grace, efficacious grace, the fullness of grace, magnified grace, refreshing grace, regenerating grace, sanctifying grace, saving grace, and sovereign grace. It also has combined listings, such as the love and grace of God, the love and grace of Christ, the love and grace of the Holy Spirit, and salvation by grace.

Moreover, descriptive phrases are used in the hymns themselves: abounding grace, abundant grace, amazing grace, boundless grace, fountain of grace, God of grace, indelible grace, marvelous grace, matchless grace, overflowing grace, pardoning grace, plenteous grace, unfailing grace, unmeasurable grace, wonderful grace, wondrous grace, the word of grace, grace all sufficient, and grace alone.

One of my favorite hymns was written by Samuel Davies, a former president of Princeton University.

> Great God of wonders!
> All thy ways Are worthy of thyself—divine:
> And the bright glories of thy grace
> Among thine other wonders shine;
> Who is a pardoning God like thee?
> Or who has grace so rich and free?

Theologians speak of common grace, electing grace, irresistible grace, persevering grace, prevenient grace, pursuing grace, and saving grace. Yet even with these terms, I have not exhausted the Christian terminology. Grace is truly the greatest theme in Scripture.

Common Grace

Let's look at some of the aspects of grace, starting with common grace, grace made available to all persons regardless of their relationship to Jesus Christ.

A number of years ago a New York rabbi named Harold S. Kushner wrote a book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* It was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for months, and its thesis was that bad things happen to good people because God is not omnipotent and things simply get away from him. At the end of the book Kushner advised us to forgive God and, like him, just try to get on with life and do the best we can.

How different from what the Bible teaches!

In Luke 13 there is an incident from the life of Jesus that has no exact parallel anywhere in the New Testament. People had come to Jesus to ask Harold Kushner's question, citing two contemporary examples. In the one example, the soldiers of King Herod had attacked some pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem from Galilee and had killed them while they were offering their sacrifices at the temple. In the other example, a tower in the district of Siloam collapsed and killed eighteen apparently innocent passersby.

The fact that the victims seem to have been innocent in both cases was an important part of the question, because the questioners wanted to know why tragedies like this can happen if God is good and if he is in control of things, as we want to believe. Perhaps he is not a good God. Or is it the case that these apparently good people were actually secret sinners and that this was God's way of striking them down for their transgressions?

For people accustomed to thinking as most of us do, Jesus' answer was startling. He replied, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?... Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:2, 3-5).

Jesus was saying that when we ask why bad things happen to good people we are actually asking the wrong question. The right question is

why good things happen to bad people. For we are all bad people, and good things happen to us every day of our lives. We have food to eat, clothes to wear, houses in which to live, families and friends, and meaningful work to do. The question is Why haven't the *worst* things happened? Why didn't the tower fall on us? Why weren't we struck down by Herod's soldiers? Why did God allow such wicked persons as ourselves to awake this morning, get out of bed, and go to work?

The answer is grace. God is a gracious God. He is gracious even to sinners.

Saving Grace

Common grace saves no one, of course. But although common grace does not save, the special grace of God operating by the preaching and teaching of the Word of God does. When we move into this area of biblical truth we need to speak about (1) sovereign grace, since God displays his saving grace where and upon whom he will; (2) redeeming grace, for we are saved by the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf; and (3) efficacious grace, for it is God's Holy Spirit who both accomplishes our regeneration and works faith.

Sovereign grace is emphasized in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Like Romans, Ephesians deals with the most basic Christian doctrines. But even more than Romans, Ephesians stresses the sovereignty of God in salvation and the eternal sweep of God's plan, by which believers are lifted from the depth of sin's depravity and curse to the heights of eternal joy and communion with God—by God's grace. This is particularly evident in Ephesians 1:3-14. One commentator calls these verses "a magnificent gateway" to the Epistle, another "a golden chain of many links," still another "an operatic overture and the flight of an eagle."

This long list of interconnected doctrines is arranged in a trinitarian pattern. For Paul says that the blessings listed come from *God the Father* as a result of his electing choice, have been won for us by *Jesus Christ* by his atoning work of redemption, and are applied to us by the

Holy Spirit through what theologians term effectual or efficacious calling.

1. *Electing grace.* Paul begins with the electing or predestinating choice of God the Father: "He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestinated us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (vv. 4-6). There are a lot of ideas in these verses, including such important ones as holiness, adoption, and the love of the Father for the Son. But the chief thought is of election.

God's electing grace is explained in several ways: as "predestination," another word for election; as being "in accordance with his pleasure and will," which explains election as being by God's will only; by "grace," which is explicitly mentioned; and finally, by the words "which he has freely given." These verses are one of the strongest expressions of sovereign grace in Scripture, for they teach that the blessings of salvation come to some people because God had determined from before the creation of the world to give them to these people—and for that reason only.

2. *Redeeming grace.* Electing women and men to salvation is not the only thing God has done as an expression of sovereign grace, however. Following the trinitarian pattern of this chapter, we come next to the doctrine of redemption (vv. 7-10). Redemption involves all three persons of the Godhead: (1) God the Father, who planned it; (2) God the Son, who accomplished it; and (3) God the Holy Spirit, who applies it to God's people. Redemption is chiefly associated with Jesus, however, who is specifically called our Redeemer. This is what verses 7 and 8 tell us: "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace, that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

Redemption is a commercial term meaning "to buy in the marketplace so that the object or person purchased might be freed from it," which is what Jesus did by dying in our place. In this illustration we are pictured as slaves to sin, unable to free ourselves from sin's bondage. Instead of freeing us, the world merely gambles for our souls. It offers everything that is its currency: fame, sex, pleasure, power, wealth. For these things millions sell their eternal souls and are perishing. But Jesus enters the marketplace as our Redeemer. He bids the price of his blood, and God says, "Sold to Jesus Christ." There is no higher bid than his. So we become his forever. The apostle Peter wrote, "It was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

3. *Efficacious grace.* The final expression of the sovereign grace of God emphasized in this chapter is the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the salvation thus planned by God the Father and achieved by God the Son to the individual (vv. 11-14). At first glance the word *chosen* in verse 11 seems to be saying the same thing as Paul's words about the Father's choice in verse 4. But the idea is actually different. In verse 4 the predestinating choice of the Father stands before everything. Here the choice made by the Holy Spirit follows predestination and means that the Holy Spirit now makes God's choice effective in individual cases by choosing those individuals or leading them to faith.

One of the greatest pictures of the grace of God calling a dead sinner to life is Jesus' raising of Lazarus, recorded in John 11. When Jesus got to Bethany he was told that Lazarus had been dead for four days and that he was already putrefying: "By this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days" (John 11:39). What a graphic description of the state of our moral and spiritual decay because of sin! There was no hope that anything could be done for Lazarus in this condition.

But "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Therefore, having prayed, Jesus called out, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43), and the call

of Jesus brought life to the dead man.

That is what the Holy Spirit does today. He works through the preaching of the Word of God to call to faith those whom God has elected to salvation and for whom Jesus Christ specifically died. Apart from those three actions—the act of God in electing, the work of Christ in dying, and the power of the Holy Spirit in calling—there would be no hope for anyone. No one could be saved. Because of those actions even the most depraved of blaspheming rebels can be turned from his or her folly and find salvation.

Abounding Grace

In Romans 5 Paul wrote of the abounding grace of God for those who have been elected to salvation, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and called to faith by the Holy Spirit: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 5:20-21).

Romans 5:20 was a favorite text of John Bunyan, best known as the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* but whose life story is told in the classic devotional autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners.* The title is taken from Romans 5:20, which says, in the King James Version that Bunyan used, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more," and from 1 Timothy 1:15, where Paul refers to himself as the "chief of sinners" (KJV). The title is thus a testimony to the abundant grace of God in Bunyan's life.

Bunyan was born in 1628 of poor parents. His father was a traveling tinker—a mender of pots and pans—and Bunyan practiced this trade for a time so that he became known as "the tinker of Bedford." He had little education. In his youth he was profligate. In time he became troubled by an acute sense of sin. He wrote of himself that in those days it seemed as if the sun that was shining in the heavens begrudged him its light and as if the very stones in the street and the tiles on the houses

had turned against him. He felt that he was abhorred by them and was not fit to live among them or benefit from them, because he had "sinned against the Savior."

God saved Bunyan and gave him great peace, and the title of his book is his testimony to what he discovered. He discovered that, no matter how great his sin was, the grace of God proved greater.

Persevering Grace

Another important feature of grace is that it is persevering. God will persevere with those he has called to faith in Christ so that none will be lost and, because he perseveres with them, they also will persevere, resisting and overcoming the world, and thus be ready for Jesus when he comes for them. In other words, God never begins a work he does not graciously bring to full completion. He is the alpha as well as the omega, the beginning *and* the end of all things.

This makes me think of three passages of Scripture that have to do with perseverance. The first is Philippians 1:6: "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

The second is John 10:27-30: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

The third is the best known of all, Romans 8:35-39: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,

will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Growth in Grace

Thus far, nearly everything I have said about grace has been in the past tense, meaning that God has revealed his grace to us or has been gracious to us in Christ Jesus, or it has been a promise that God will continue to be gracious. But Paul's benediction is a prayer. That is, it is a request that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ would continue to be with his readers and that they might experience even more of it than they had before. What can this mean? If God has been so abundantly gracious to us, how can we continue to grow in grace? There are at least four ways Paul's prayer can and should be taken.

1. *We need to be settled in the great grace doctrines.* There are several ways we can fail to be settled in grace. We can allow something other than Jesus Christ to be at the center of our lives. We can forget how gracious God has been and therefore become harsh or cruel with others. We can substitute the mere form of Christianity for the gospel. The cure for these ills is to be so aware of the nature of the grace of God in saving us that we become enamored of Jesus Christ and never forget that it is by grace alone that we have been brought out of death and darkness into God's marvelous life and light.

2. *We need to grow in the knowledge of God's grace.* Knowledge of the grace of God is not a static thing. Therefore, we need to seek continually to grow in that knowledge. Peter wrote, "Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). For this we must study the Word of God and meditate on its teachings.

3. *We need to exercise the gift for serving others that God has given each of us.* We do not often think of the grace of God and the gifts of God as belonging together, but a number of passages combine the two ideas. Peter wrote that each Christian "should use whatever

gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, "To each one of us grace has been given as Christ appointed it" (Eph. 4:7). Therefore, when we pray that "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with God's people" one thing we might mean is that each Christian should use the gift he or she has been given by God to help others.

4. *We need a continuing supply of grace in order to complete the work God assigns us.* Paul was conscious of having received grace to carry out his calling as an apostle. But he also knew that he needed it constantly, and he was aware that others needed a continual supply of grace to do the work God had assigned to them. Obviously you and I do also.

Chapter 237.
The Church at Corinth

Romans 16:21-23

When I began this exposition of Romans 16, I said that the last chapter of Paul's letter contains two long lists of names, thirty-three in all, which make this section fascinating. The first list of names (vv. 3-16) was of Christians in the church of Rome to which Paul was writing, and a study of these names reveals a great deal about the early church and of Paul's relationships to these people. The list we come to now (vv. 21-23) is of people who were with Paul in Corinth, the city from which he was writing, and it is even more interesting than the first list.

Paul had been staying in the house of a Roman nobleman named Gaius, who was also a Christian. This man had furnished him with an amanuensis, or secretary, who had been writing down the words Paul dictated. The letter was coming to an end, and now other Christians who may have followed the dictation over a period of several days or

weeks gathered and were included in the greetings Paul sent to their fellow believers in the far off capital of the empire.

What is said, though brief, is one of the most remarkable pictures of Christian life and fellowship from the ancient world or, for that matter, from all history or literature.

Number-Three and Number-Four Boy

To begin our study, we need to understand something of the characters who were involved, and the place to begin is with Tertius and Quartus, who are mentioned in verses 22 and 23. In his commentary on Romans, Donald Grey Barnhouse explains that the first time he was in the Orient he was entertained in a beautiful home that had a large retinue of servants. One of these servants spoke English and had everything under his control. The man who was Barnhouse's host said, "He is the best number-one boy in China."

"Number-one boy?" queried Barnhouse. "What are the qualifications of a number-one boy?"

His host explained. "The number-one boy is a Chinese institution. He runs absolutely everything in connection with the household. He hires the other servants. He supervises the marketing. You would never find him carrying a package; a third boy or a fourth boy would be doing that. The number-one boy is the equivalent of an English gentleman's gentleman, plus a nurse, a housekeeper, and many other things. The ambition of third boy is to become second boy, and the ambition of second boy is to become number-one boy."

The same system prevailed in the Roman Empire, and the names of two of these servants, number-three boy and number-four boy, are recorded here. In a prominent Roman household, as this was, the servants would have the names Primus (one), Secundus (two), Tertius (three), Quartus (four), Quintus (five), and so on. So in Romans 16 we have a case of the number-three slave and the number-four slave adding their names to

those of the missionaries, plus prominent Gaius and Erastus, as the letter is sent to their fellow believers in Rome.

A Historical Reconstruction

Let's take this social background, add what we can find out about the other characters, and reconstruct this important historical moment in Corinth. And let's follow the text closely for our guidance.

First, Paul sends greetings from Timothy, his fellow worker, and from Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, whom he calls his relatives. Timothy was Paul's young protege, whom he had picked up in Lystra on his second missionary journey. He had a Greek father but a Jewish mother, which made him a Jew, and Paul used him to build up the Gentile churches he had himself founded earlier. Paul thought highly of Timothy, writing this of him to the Philippians: "I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare" (Phil. 2:20), and "Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (v. 22).

The only puzzle about Timothy is why Paul mentions him here at the end of his letter, rather than at the beginning, as he usually does (see 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon). A possible answer might be that Timothy was not present when the letter was begun and had only come in at the end, which is also quite likely the case with the next names mentioned.

It is impossible to be certain who these next men whom Paul calls his relatives (that is, Jews) are, but we can make some probable identifications. Sosipater is most likely Sopater (a variation of the same name) of Berea, who is said in Acts 20:4 to have been one of those who accompanied Paul through Greece on the way to Jerusalem to present the offering from the Gentile churches.
He would have represented Berea. Jason was the name of Paul's host when he was in
Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-7). Since this is the same general area of the world as Berea, it is likely that he was also part of the party that was

accompanying Paul to Jerusalem. Lucius is not Luke the evangelist, as the early church father Origen thought (the names are distinct), but he may be one of the leaders of the church at Antioch who is mentioned in Acts 13:1, though that is uncertain.

What seems to be the case is that these men were part of the group of specially appointed representatives who were gathering in Corinth for the journey to Jerusalem. Timothy may have just arrived. Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater had come. Others were expected momentarily. It may have been the case that the ship they were taking was already in the harbor, that they were leaving the next morning and that Paul needed to draw the letter to a rapid close. It would have been natural for Paul to have dictated greetings from these important representatives as he ended.

But notice this. Paul used an amanuensis when he wrote his letters, usually adding his own greeting in his own hand at the end (see Gal. 6:11; 1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Thess. 3:17). His amanuensis on this occasion was Tertius, the one I have identified as the number-three boy in Gaius' household, and at this point this number-three slave added a greeting of his own: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord" (v. 22).

It may be that Paul paused for a moment, looking around to see who else was present and should be included, and that Tertius simply went on writing, eager to send his own greeting as a Christian in Corinth to the Christians who were in Rome. Or it may be that Paul looked at him and said something like, "Tertius, you've been working on this letter so faithfully and for so long that you must have writer's cramp. Wouldn't you like to send a greeting of your own?" However it happened, this is an example of a slave sending greetings to people he had never met but to whom he felt attached because of their common identity as believers in Jesus Christ.

And there is something else too. The words "in the Lord," which are part of Tertius' greeting, are usually put after the words "greet you" by translators, so that the text reads, "I... greet you in the Lord." But in the

Greek text the words actually follow "who wrote this letter," so what this lowly slave is probably saying is that he did his work as an amanuensis "in [or unto] the Lord," that is, as Leon Morris puts it, "not as a mechanical project, but as... a piece of service" to Jesus Christ."

Do you do that? The work you have may be menial, and you may not have a very prominent position as the world evaluates such jobs. But you can do your work "unto the Lord." Paul told the slaves in Ephesus, "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free" (Eph. 6:7-8). God will reward you too if you do whatever he has given you to do joyfully and well.

Gaius, Erastus, and Number-Four Boy

In verse 23 Paul mentions two other prominent people who were present as he drew this letter to a close, plus Quartus: Gaius, who was Paul's host, and Erastus, an elected official in the city. The verse says, "Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings."

Gaius was a common name, and this Gaius is not the Gaius from Derbe who is mentioned as another of Paul's official traveling companions in Acts 20:4. He must have been a rich man at Corinth, since he was hosting Paul in his home, was a host to "the whole church," and owned at least four slaves. He must have been a Roman. He was almost surely the Gaius Paul admits to having baptized in 1 Corinthians 1:14, though it was generally Paul's practice to leave the baptizing to others. This means that Gaius was probably one of the first of Paul's converts in Corinth. There is also reason for believing that he is the Titius Justus of Acts 18:7, into whose house Paul entered when he was forced to leave the synagogue. His full name would have been Gaius Titius Justus.

Since Gaius is said to be not only Paul's host but also the host of "the whole church," the congregation at Corinth probably met in his large home. Christians always met in homes in those days, as they had no

church buildings. Gaius was wealthy, so it was natural that he would have opened his home for the Christians' worship services.

Erastus was a public official, undoubtedly a friend of Gaius. He may have been the man by that name whom Paul mentions in 2 Timothy 4:20 as having "stayed in Corinth," but this is questionable since an official like Erastus would probably not have been free to travel with Paul (see Acts 19:22).

It is interesting in connection with Erastus that archaeologists have uncovered an inscription from Corinth that bears his name. It was next to a first-century public sidewalk, and it read, "Erastus in return for his aedileship laid [this pavement] at his own expense." Officials regularly paid for public works, and this is what Erastus seems to have done. This inscription also suggests that he had held more than one office. Paul calls him "the city's director of public works"
(actually, it's *oikonomos*, or treasurer), but the inscription says that he served as *aedile.* An aedile could have been such a director, but he would not have been the treasurer.

Robert Haldane writes that the "office of Erastus, although in itself it may appear trifling, is in reality of great importance. It shows us that Christians may hold offices even under heathen governments, and that to serve Christ we are not to be abstracted from worldly business." The inclusion of Erastus rounds out this picture of the early church by showing us that rich and poor, free men and slaves, full-time church workers and public officials, were all part of its diverse makeup.

Barnhouse wrote, "I cannot pass you by, Erastus, without recording that hundreds of Negro mothers, who gave birth to their little black slave sons in the America of a century ago, pored over the names for boys found here. They did not want their boys to be called Number Three and Number Four, so they did not name them Tertius and Quartus. But they picked your name, and hundreds of black boys in early American life were called 'Rastus' because of you."

And how about Quartus? Paul mentions him in verse 23. Quartus was the least significant of all the people who seem to have been gathered around Paul that day, but he is not left out. It seems that as Paul glanced around to make sure that he had included greetings from everyone, Quartus, off in a corner, raised his hand as if to say, "Don't forget me!" So Paul didn't. He spoke to Tertius: "... and our brother Quartus." Tertius wrote it down.

In the Greek text the verb came before the rest of the sentence. So Paul would have spoken it like this: "Greets you Erastus, the city's director of public works,... and Quartus, a brother."

A Snapshot of History

We have seen who these people were and have begun to appreciate the picture of the early church that emerges at the end of this important letter. Now it is worth summing up some of the lessons from our survey.

1. *The reality of genuine Christian fellowship.* There is no better picture in all the Bible, or possibly in all the world's literature, of genuine Christian fellowship than this snapshot of the believers in Corinth. In the first centuries none of the Christians worried about brotherhood. They simply ignored the differences that were dividing the rough Roman world and came together as followers of Jesus Christ—the master and the slave, the Roman and the Greek, the Jew and the Gentile, the rich and the poor. "It was an actual oneness, absolutely above and beyond all human distinctions," wrote Barnhouse. "Nothing short of this could have moved the simple number-four slave, Quartus, to ask Paul to send his love to the unknown brothers across the sea."
2. *Each one's special calling to serve Christ.* It was an impressive gathering of full-time

Christian workers who were meeting in the house of Gaius of Corinth prior to leaving for Jerusalem, but nothing in the wording of these greetings (or anything else, for that matter) suggests that the others should have followed them in their calling. Gaius could not be an

apostle, but he served Christ by opening up his home for the Christians' meetings and by hosting traveling church workers. Erastus could not travel with Paul, but he served the Lord as a public official in the important metropolitan area of Corinth. Tertius served by writing down Paul's letter, and Quartus undoubtedly had his duties too.

It is the same for us. You have your unique calling, given to you by Jesus Christ, and you are to serve him by doing it well, not by trying to do someone else's job. The body has many parts, but it is "one body" (1 Cor. 12:19). You may not be an apostle or be able to serve God as a missionary. But you can open your house to believers who are in need. And if you do not have a house to open, you can open your heart. There are many closed hearts in this harsh sinful world. What a calling, to have an open heart to others for the sake of Christ! It is important for each to do his or her part "unto the Lord."

3. *The importance of people the world thinks insignificant.* If this had been a secular rather than a Christian gathering, Tertius may have done his part and Quartus may have been present to attend to the demands of the master and his guests, but the two slaves would never have been allowed to take part in what was going on by sending greetings, as if they were on the same level as those who were writing or those who were in Rome. Things were entirely different here because this was a Christian community! Here each one was important: each was listened to, noticed, and respected.

4. *The importance of world missions.* There is a lesson too about the importance of world missions. Here are Roman slaves, people utterly without status in the ancient world, who were nevertheless contacted by Paul and the other Christian missionaries, brought to faith in Christ, and became members of the body of Christ. Barnhouse asks, "Are you interested when you hear that there are new believers in an Indian tribe on the upper Amazon? Does your heart go out to those who are worshipping in a church in Africa whose mud pews are baked in the sun before the mud walls are built around them and the palm

roof goes over them? Quartus knew nobody in Rome and nobody in Rome had ever heard of Quartus, but he loved them and wanted them to know it." God has his people in all these places, and there are others who have not heard the gospel. Shouldn't you help to take it to them?

A Testimony from Corinth

As we look back across the centuries that have passed between Paul's day and ours, we can almost talk to Gaius' two slaves, number three and number four. Suppose you could speak to them, as they speak to us through this letter. Suppose you could ask them questions. Would you like to know what their lives were like? Would you like to know whether they were cruelly treated as slaves? Beaten perhaps? Were their lives empty, cruel, nasty, brutish, or short?

Let Barnhouse answer for them: "No!" they say. "We were slaves, but one day Paul came into the house of our master, Gaius. We saw a great transformation in him. Gaius was transformed. He began to be kind to us. Soon he had Paul tell us about Christ. For two years Paul lived in Corinth, and he came to our house often. We got the bread and the wine ready when the crowd came on Sunday. It made more work for us, but it was delightful. They broke the bread, and we began to eat from the same loaf as our master. They filled a chalice with wine, and our master sipped it and smiled as he handed it to us. Day after day everything was transformed. He put his hand on us and cried as he spoke of the grace of God that had saved us all. He said that he was our master, but he realized that he had a master, Christ. He wanted to treat us the way Christ treated him. Love transformed our lives."

What an amazing transformation! And there are also transformations yet to come. Tertius and Quartus, number-three boy and number-four boy, do you remember how Jesus said that in heaven the first shall be last and the last first? You did your work well here. Did you know that in heaven you would not be Tertius and Quartus, but Primus and Primus, number one? For that is what you are now. Oh, that we all might strive for that distinction and one day hear our heavenly master

say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!... Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

Chapter 238.
Paul's Gospel

Romans 16:25-26

There is something a bit upsetting about an individual who constantly uses the first-person possessive pronouns *my* and *mine.* Someone who is always talking about *my* car, *my* house, *my* job, *my* vacation, or *my* friends is usually not very likeable, especially if he is implying that what is his is better than what is ours. I am reminded that comedian Chevy Chase once began a television special with "Hello, I'm Chevy Chase and you're not." We do not like anyone to be that self-absorbed or egotistical. Is that what Paul is doing as he ends his letter to the Romans, speaking of *"my* gospel"? We sense at once that he is not. When Paul says "my gospel" he does not mean that the gospel is his as opposed to being ours or someone else's. The gospel is for anyone who will have it. What "my gospel" actually means is "the true gospel," as the context makes clear. This true gospel is Paul's only in the sense that he has appropriated it personally by a faith that involved committing his life to Jesus Christ, and in the sense that he was teaching it.

"My gospel!" It would be good if the gospel was possessed by each of us in exactly the same way and as intensely. But in order to possess it we need to understand what it is.

The God Who Is Able

Paul usually ends his letters with a benediction rather than a doxology, but it is a doxology that we have here. These last verses are an ascription of praise "to him [that is, God] who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ." This has caused some commentators to suggest that the doxology is misplaced, and some of the early manuscripts actually work it in earlier, at the end of

chapter 14, for instance, thus ending the letter with the greetings in 16:21-24. Then they add a benediction. Yet the doxology is not inappropriate here. As Brevard S. Childs said, "The doxology is not a liturgical response of the letter's recipients to
Paul's words, but a liturgical response of Paul to the subject of his book."

The subject of the book is the gospel. So this tells us from the very beginning that the gospel has to do with God and what he has accomplished for us through the work of Jesus Christ.

This means that the gospel is not human in its origin. Nor is it human in its power or objective. *Gospel* means "good news." This good news is worth talking about. But when we talk about it we are not talking about it as if it were something some great philosopher had thought up or some scientist has discovered. It is not a new insight into human nature or a new discovery of something that is possible for us if we just learn the methodology involved or simply put our minds to it. It is not a matter of human thought or effort at all. It is something that has its origins in God, is accomplished by God, and has God's own goals as its objective.

The words *who is able* are especially important, for they are a way of talking about God's sovereignty. Some years ago I prepared a special series of Sunday evening messages for Tenth Presbyterian Church titled "The God Who Is Able." They were based on seven Bible verses in which the words *God is able* (or their close equivalents) occurred. The titles were: "Able to Save" (Heb. 7:25), "Able to Keep" (2 Tim. 1:12), "Grace Abounding" (2 Cor. 9:8), "Able to Help in Temptation" (Heb. 2:18), "How to Grow Spiritually" (Eph. 3:20), "God Is No Quitter" (Jude 24), and "Able to Raise Our Bodies" (Phil. 3:21). There were so many relevant verses that I didn't even use this text from Romans. My point was that God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us," as Paul told the Ephesians (Eph. 3:20).

For that is where it all begins and ends. We saw that when we studied the doxology at the end of chapter 11: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

The Heart of the Gospel

When we say that the gospel begins and ends in God we do not mean God the Father only. We also mean that the gospel begins and ends in Jesus Christ, God's Son, for it was of him and was centered in him from before the foundation of the world.

This is strikingly apparent in Romans, for these closing verses are a deliberate echo of the opening paragraph of Paul's letter, where Jesus Christ is likewise prominent:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

Romans 1:1-5

Romans 16:25-26 echoes at least four of those themes: (1) the gospel is "of God"; (2) this gospel is about God's "Son," Jesus Christ; (3) the gospel was promised in the "Scriptures" of the Old Testament but has only been made fully known now; and (4) the goal is that the "Gentiles," like the Jews, might arrive at "the obedience that comes from faith." Each of these themes is repeated in the letter's closing doxology, but the center is clearly Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the content of the gospel. He is the one who was promised in the Scriptures from the beginning and who has now come. Moreover, it is to him that we are to summon the obedience of the Gentile nations.

One of the great tragedies of the church down through the ages is that Christians have repeatedly allowed other things to rise to undue prominence and so eclipse the preeminence of Christ. Sometimes this has occurred in regard to minor points of doctrine. In such times an observer of Christian affairs might gain the impression that it is far more important whether one holds a right view of the sacraments, or church government, or abstinence from certain kinds of conduct, or eschatology than whether one understands who Jesus is and what he came to earth to do and is committed to him in true, living, and active discipleship.

At other times, and even more seriously, the church has allowed false teaching to obscure Christ's nature (either denying his full deity or his full humanity) and what he has done for our salvation. Any theology that allows human efforts or good works to intrude on Christ's work as the ground of our salvation destroys the gospel and denies the Lord's preeminence.

Revelation of the Mystery

The third thing these verses tell us about the gospel is that it has been a "mystery hidden for long ages past" but that it is "now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God" (vv. 25-26).

When we use the word *mystery* today we are usually thinking of something incomprehensible, or quite possibly a certain kind of detective story where there is a murder at the beginning, an investigation by a shrewd inspector, and a final revelation of "who done it" in the last chapter. The biblical idea refers to something that has been hidden but has now been made known. There are many mysteries like this in the Bible, and most are in Paul's writings.

When I was looking at this word in our earlier study of Romans 11:25, I listed the following mysteries:

1. "The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 13:11)
2. "The Mystery of the Olive Tree" (Rom. 11:25)

3. "The Great Mystery of Christ and the Church" (Eph. 5:32)
4. "The Mystery of Piety" (1 Tim. 3:16)
5. "The Mystery of the Rapture of the Saints" (1 Cor. 15:51)
6. "The Mystery of Lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7)
7. "The Mystery of God Finished" (Rev. 10:7).

The question here is what specific mystery Paul is referring to. The only time that he has used the word *mystery* in Romans is in chapter 11, where it referred to a temporary hardening of the
Jews "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (v. 25). That is, the mystery was that
God was going to extend salvation to Gentiles as well as Jews. This idea had been mostly unknown or at least not understood until Jesus actually came, opened the door to the Gentiles, and gave the Great Commission to take the gospel to all the peoples of the world (see Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8).

The argument in favor of this meaning is that Paul has stressed the application of the gospel to the Gentiles throughout the letter and, in fact, even ends on this note, saying that the mystery has been revealed "so that *all nations* [that is, Gentiles] might believe and obey him" (v. 26). The problem is that this is only part of the gospel, and if Paul is thinking of the whole gospel, then the mystery he has in mind must be bigger.

Most students of Romans think that Paul is instead talking about the gospel of salvation from sin through the work of Christ, which has been the theme of the letter. I agree. But the problem with this view is in seeing how this "gospel" can be said to have been "hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings." Here are some questions. If it was hidden for long ages past, how can it be said to have been revealed by the prophets? If it has been, it was not hidden. Or again, how can it even be said to have been hidden before the prophets? Don't we speak of the protoevangelium, or

first announcement of the gospel, as early as the third chapter of Genesis (v. 15), not to mention intimations of it elsewhere in the Old Testament? Isn't it the case that all who were saved during the entire Old Testament period were saved by looking forward to the Savior who should come?

Most writers think of the gospel being anticipated in the Old Testament prophets, but F. Godet, the Swiss commentator, thinks that when Paul speaks of the "prophetic writings" in which the gospel has been revealed, he is thinking of the writings of the apostles, the New Testament prophets, and of himself and his own book of Romans particularly.

In my judgment this is pressing Paul's words too far. What he is saying is that the gospel is something no human being could have guessed. In the past it was entirely hidden in the mind of God. In fact, when God began to reveal it during the Old Testament period, the details were puzzling even to the prophets to whom the revelation was given, for they were unable fully to understand what God's Spirit had caused them to write. We understand it only because Jesus has now come.

Peter described the situation, saying, "The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Peter 1:10-11).

The reason we understand the gospel now is that the Holy Spirit has given the apostles understanding of who he is and what he has accomplished in agreement with the prior revelation. Indeed, this is how Paul handled the Old Testament material in writing Romans. First, he explained the gospel. But then, at each major step in the argument, he supported his explanation with direct citations from the Old Testament. These texts were not necessarily clear earlier. But they are now, since Jesus has fulfilled them and the Holy Spirit has given the apostles understanding of what they mean.

The Wisdom of God

I want to stress again that not only is the gospel "mystery" known to us today by revelation, but it is only by revelation that the gospel can be known. There is nothing about it that you or I or any other human being could possibly dream up. I wrote about this at the end of the third volume of these studies when I was looking at the wisdom of God, showing that what draws out Paul's awe at the "riches of [God's] wisdom" is not the wisdom God displayed in the ordering of creation, as wonderful as that may be, but rather his wisdom in saving sinners such as you and me. It is what he was unfolding in the first eleven chapters of the letter.

1. *The wisdom of God in justification (chaps. 1-4).* In the first main section of the letter Paul explains the way of salvation. For centuries God had been saving sinners who deserved his just judgment and condemnation. But the question was this: How could God save sinners and at the same time remain a just and holy God? To use Paul's language, how could he be both "just and the one who justifies" the ungodly (Rom. 3:26)? Since God was justifying the ungodly, it would seem that for centuries there was something like a shadow over the good name of God.

This puzzle is beyond the wisdom of mere men and women. But it was not beyond the wisdom of God. Thus it was that in the fullness of time "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Or, to go back to what Paul says in Romans, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement... to demonstrate his justice at the present time" (Rom. 3:25-26). This means that God satisfied the claims of his justice by punishing the innocent Jesus for our sins. Jesus bore the wrath of God in our place. Thus, the demands of God's justice were fully met and, justice being satisfied, the love of God was then free to reach out, embrace, and fully save the sinner.

Who but God could think up such a solution to the sin problem? None of us could have done it. But God did, and he has revealed it to us in a

gospel that is utterly beyond our powers to imagine.

2. *The wisdom of God in sanctification (chaps. 5-8).* The next section of Romans discusses the sinner's need for sanctification. The justification discussed in chapters 1-4 is by the work of Christ, which means that it is by grace. But if that is so, what is to stop a justified person from indulging in his or her sinful nature, since the person's salvation has already been secured by Christ's work? Why should we not continue to sin? In fact, why should we not "go on sinning so that grace may increase" (Rom. 6:1)?

God solves this problem by showing that we are never justified apart from being regenerated or being made alive in Christ. Christians have been given a new nature, and this new nature, being the very life of Jesus Christ, will inevitably produce good works corresponding to the character of God. In fact, this is the only sure proof of our having been saved by him.

Who but God could think up a gospel like that? We would never do it, because we do not naturally hold grace and works together. If we emphasize morality, as some do, we begin to think that we can be saved by our good works and so strive to do it. We repudiate grace. But if, on the other hand, we emphasize grace, knowing that we cannot possibly be saved by our inadequate and polluted works, we have a tendency to do away with works entirely and so slide into antinomianism. It is a great dilemma. But God has devised a gospel that is entirely of grace and yet produces exceptional works in those who are being saved.

3. *The wisdom of God displayed in human history (chaps. 9-11).* The third section of Romans is concerned with the acts of God in history. The problem is that God made special salvation promises to the Jewish people, and yet, in spite of these promises, the majority of Jews do not respond to the gospel. Doesn't this indicate that the purposes of God have failed? And what about the Gentiles? There are fewer promises for them. Yet in Paul's day the Gentiles seemed to be responding to the apostles' preaching. Does this mean that God has rejected the Jews in favor of the Gentiles?

> If he has, isn't that wrong? And doesn't it destroy the doctrine of the believer's eternal security? Doesn't it mean that God fails?

Paul's answer is a magnificent theodicy in which he justifies the ways of God with men, showing that God has rejected Israel for a time in order that his mercy might be extended to the Gentiles, but adding that Gentile salvation will provoke Israel to jealousy and so in time bring the Jewish people to faith in their Messiah.

Who could devise a plan of that scope for world history? We could not do it. We cannot understand it fully even though we have it unfolded for us in the Bible. It is complex, manifold. But it is not difficult for God. It is part of the mystery, previously hidden but now explicitly revealed.

Not Just Saved, Established

I close with two important points, each part of this closing doxology. First, the goal of the gospel is not simply that we should be saved from sin's punishment and go to heaven when we die, but that we might be "established" in God's grace now—that is, that we might be settled, strong, and unshaken (Rom. 16:25).

This is exactly the word Paul used in Romans 1 when he spoke of his desire to visit Rome "so that," he said, "I may impart to you some spiritual gift *to make you strong*" (v. 11). Paul knew that there are many things in life that can unsettle us and that the devil wants to make us vacillating in our faith so that we will be of no use to God or anybody else. Paul wanted his converts to be strong Christians, and he tells us that this is also the goal of God for us.

But notice: It is God "who is able to establish" us and to whom we must look, not some other Christian, not even Paul. Paul was God's vehicle for giving us this great revelation that we know as the letter to the Romans. But Romans is not Paul's book. It is God's book. And the power we need to be established in the gospel it speaks of is the power of God. A Christian who leans upon some other Christian—a pastor, a teacher, or someone else—may have to be shaken loose by God through some crisis in order to learn that God alone is the solid rock and only

adequate foundation for his people's faith. We must lean upon God to be established.

My second concluding point comes from Paul's last words, where he speaks of God's purpose in the revelation of the gospel where others are concerned, saying that it is "so that all nations might believe and obey him." He means that the gospel must be proclaimed to everyone.

Moreover, Paul links this objective to "the command of the eternal God" (v. 26). We find this command in the Lord's Great Commission in each of the four gospels and the Book of Acts. God has told us to take this gospel, previously hidden but now revealed, to all the peoples of the world. Paul took that command with utmost seriousness. It is why he became a missionary to the Gentiles. It is why he wrote Romans. You and I must also take it seriously by teaching it to everyone we can.

Chapter 239.
Glory to the Only Wise God

Romans 16:27

After eight exciting years of pulpit work and 239 separate sermons, I have come to the end of my expositions of Paul's great letter to the Romans, the most important book in the New Testament, probably in the entire Bible, and certainly the most influential letter in all history or all the world's literature. They have been excellent years for Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where these sermons were preached. The church has grown substantially and visibly stronger, Christians have matured in the Lord, and the evangelistic and service ministries that reach out into Tenth's broad city neighborhood have increased.

How should I end a series of this scope? Some might want a word about the greatness of the letter or even the outstanding intellectual, visionary, and creative qualities of the human being who composed it. But our studies should end as the letter itself does, not with words praising the

apostle Paul—still less with stories of what has happened at Tenth Church through this teaching—but rather with words praising the great, sovereign, merciful, and eternal God of whose gospel Paul and we have been made missionaries.

The letter rightly ends: "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen."
This is a doxology, and it ascribes glory to God in four respects: (1) to God simply as God; (2) to God as the only God; (3) to God as the only wise God; and finally (4) to God through Jesus Christ.

To God Be the Glory

One of the most important things that can be said about Paul is that he was always thinking about God. He saw himself as a creature made by God. He understood his work as having been given to him by God. He wanted to order his life and all the goals of his life in accordance with the will of God. Moreover, when he came to write about the gospel it had to do with God and his purposes from beginning to end.

Donald Grey Barnhouse summarized the content of Romans this way.

In the opening chapter we find the gospel of God. This is followed by a discussion of the wrath of God. Then the righteousness of God is set forth. Then we find how the righteousness of God can be communicated to sinful men. From then on we see ourselves as the people of God, at peace with God, blessed by God to such an extent that we can cry, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Then after a section on the ancient people of God and the unchangeableness of God, we come to our answering obligations to God, all leading up to our text, "To God be the glory."

This is an example of what in an earlier chapter I called a Christian mind—that is, a way of thinking that revolves around God and the truths that he has made known to us. The opposite of possessing a Christian mind or thinking in a Christian way is secularism.

Secularism is an umbrella term that covers a number of other "isms," such as humanism, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism, hedonism, and materialism. But it, more than any other single word, aptly describes the intellectual frame of reference and value structure of the people of our time. There is a right way to be secular, of course. Christians live in the world and are therefore rightly concerned about the world's affairs. We have legitimate secular concerns. But secularism is more than this. *Secular* is derived from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means age, and secularism is a philosophy that does not look beyond this age or world for the whole of reality but instead operates as if this world is all there is.

In an earlier chapter I illustrated this philosophical secularism by something Carl Sagan said in the television series *Cosmos.* He was seen before a spectacular view of the heavens with its many swirling galaxies, and he said in a hushed, almost reverential tone of voice, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." That is secularism as clearly as it can be stated. It is bound up entirely by the limits of the material universe, by what we can see and touch and weigh and measure. If we think in terms of our existence here, it means operating within the limits of life on earth. If we are thinking of time, it means disregarding the eternal and thinking only of the
"now."

Each of us should understand that well, because it is the philosophy we are surrounded with every day of our lives and in every conceivable place and circumstance. Yet that is the outlook we must heartily oppose and to which we must refuse to be conformed. Instead of being conformed to this world, as if that is all there is, we are to see all things as relating to God and to eternity, which is the true, Christian way of thinking that Paul models for us in Romans.

Here is the contrast, as expressed by Harry Blamires: "To think secularly is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth; it is to keep one's calculations rooted in this-worldly criteria. To think Christianly is to accept all things with the mind as related, directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed

and chosen child of God." We think Christianly when we begin and end with God, as Paul did, and can say with Paul, "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Glory to the Only God

These closing words of the letter not only give praise to God as the beginning and ending of all things but also praise to God as the *only* God—they give glory to him and to no other. These words are opposed to polytheism and to all forms of idolatry.

This reminds us at once of the first of the Ten Commandments, which says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). It demands our exclusive worship. This is what created a problem for the early Christians, of course. In the Greek and Roman worlds of Paul's day an individual was permitted to worship any variety of gods. So there was nothing wrong with worshiping the God of the Bible. The problem was that the Bible demanded that only the Bible's God and no other god be worshiped, and the teaching of the New Testament was that Jesus, who was the only Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, be offered exclusive worship also.

Christians were executed not because they worshiped Jesus, but because they refused to worship Caesar too. They would not say, "Caesar is Lord."

To worship any god but Jehovah is to break this command. But to break it we do not need to worship a pagan God like Zeus or Aphrodite, or even a Roman emperor. We do it whenever we give some person or some thing the first place in our affections, which belongs to God alone. In our day people do it most often when they substitute themselves for God, which they do whenever they assume the right to determine their own moral standards.

Most of the commandments are in negative form ("you shall not"). Only two are positive. But the negative clearly implies the positive, and the positive the negative. Therefore, the command to have "no other gods before me" also means that we are to worship God with all our heart,

soul, and mind, as Jesus said when he was asked to state the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37). In order to do this we would need to see everything in life from God's point of view, as disclosed in the Bible; to make his moral will our guide and his glory our goal; to put him first in our thoughts, first in our relationships, first in our work, first in our leisure time and recreation. It would mean exercising responsible stewardship of all the money, time, and talents he has entrusted to us.

Paul put his whole life at the disposal of this one true God. This is what we are required to do too, if we are truly Christians. If we are serious about our faith, we must say with Paul, "To the *only* wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

To the Only Wise God Be Glory

The third way in which this doxology ascribes praise or glory to God is as the only *wise* God. This is the point I emphasized in the last study when I was writing about the "mystery" of the gospel and how it is now revealed.

Verses 25 and 26, the earlier part of this doxology, emphasized God's power. It is what was meant by the words "to him who is able." It is a way of speaking about God's omnipotence and sovereignty. Here, however, the stress is upon God's wisdom. Why this change? Obviously because this is a natural and proper response to the mystery that Paul has written about. There is nothing about the gospel that could possibly have occurred to the natural mind. We could not think up the way of salvation. How to preserve the justice of God while at the same time allowing him to save sinful men and women is beyond us. We could not think up a way of sanctification consistent with this gospel. Either we would emphasize good works and so repudiate grace and fall into legalism, or else we would emphasize grace, forget about good works, and fall into antinomianism.

And as for the purposes of God in history, who would ever have guessed that God is using history to demonstrate his many glorious attributes—his grace, mercy, and compassion in saving those who are

being saved, and his justice and wrath in passing by those who are being passed by? And who would have viewed history as a stage upon which God has hardened the Jews so that the gospel might be extended to the Gentiles, and that he is provoking the Jews to jealousy by the salvation of Gentiles so that in the end all Israel might be saved (Rom. 11:25)?

None of us would ever be able to think up a gospel like this. This gospel is divine in origin, and it displays the supreme wisdom of God in all its parts and on every page of the written revelation. We are therefore right to say with Paul, "To the only *wise* God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen." The sad thing is that the world continues to regard this gospel as
foolishness even after it has been revealed, a point Paul makes in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

> "I will destroy the wisdom of the
> wise; the intelligence of the
> intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Glory to God through Jesus Christ

The fact that Paul preached Christ leads to the last of the four points of the doxology that closes Romans. In these closing words he also

ascribes glory to the only wise God "through Jesus Christ." There are two ways glory is given to God through Jesus:

1. *It is only through Jesus Christ that God can be known by us.* Only through Jesus can we know God's glory in the fullest sense. In the Upper Room shortly before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus gave his final teaching to his disciples. He spoke about going away from them, trying to prepare them for his death, and Thomas said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus replied, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

This was puzzling to the disciples too. It must have shown on their faces. But eventually Philip voiced a deep desire, which was and has always been the deepest longing of the people of God. It was the desire Moses expressed on Mount Sinai when he asked to see God's face (Exod. 33:1820). Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" (John 14:1-10). This was a clear and unmistakable statement that if we want to know what God is like, the place where we are to find him is by looking to Jesus Christ.

Later on in John's gospel Jesus said the same thing, only this time using the very word of our text, *glory.* Here he is praying to the Father in what we call his high priestly prayer, and the theme of his prayer is glory. Jesus prayed, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.... I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:1, 4-5). This has to do with the honor given to the Father by Jesus

through his obedience and the glory to be given to the Son by the Father through his resurrection and return to heaven.

Then Jesus prayed for his disciples and eventually for the church that would come into being through their testimony, and his point was that he had made God known to them. Finally, summing it all up, he said, "I have given them the glory that you gave me" (v. 22). In other words, God is glorified through Jesus Christ because the nature of God has been made known to God's people through Jesus' life and testimony.

2. *It is only through Jesus Christ that we can glorify God.* It is only through Jesus that we can come to God in worship, for worship means praising or glorifying God. Jesus also taught this in John 14 when he said, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6).

There is a wonderful illustration of this truth in the Old Testament. The Shekinah Glory was the visible manifestation of the presence of God among the Jews during the days of their wilderness wandering—the cloud that guided the people in the desert and settled down upon the tabernacle when they camped. By day it was a pillar of cloud. By night it became a pillar of fire. When it came to rest upon the tabernacle and actually entered into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle to abide between the wings of the cherubim above the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant, it became a bright light. This was a symbol of the intense, holy presence of God that was so pure and so terrible that no one could enter the Most Holy Place and live. In fact, some who attempted to do so were at once struck down.

This is what any Jew would immediately have thought about when a person spoke of God's glory, an unapproachable earthly symbol of the greater and likewise unapproachable heavenly glory, concerning which, when Moses had asked God to see his glory, God replied, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod. 33:20).

Matthew in his Gospel tells us that when Jesus died "at that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt. 27:51). The curtain separated the room of the temple known as the Holy Place

from the room known as the Most Holy Place, which housed the ark of the covenant. So the tearing of the veil showed that the way into the presence of God, into the very presence of his glory, has now been opened to us by the death of Jesus Christ. Apart from his death for our sin none of us could approach God and live. But now, because of his death and through faith in him, even the poorest and least distinguished of God's people can approach God joyfully and without fear and offer worship that the Father will accept.

All this is possible only through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through him alone that we can know God, through him alone that we can come to God, and through him alone that we can give God glory. So we say with Paul, "To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen."

Amen and Amen

And what about the "amen"? We have been working our way through Romans slowly, verse by verse and at times almost word by word. It is appropriate that we also think carefully about this last word of the letter. What does it mean to say "Amen"?

Amen is a wonderfully rich word. It is found in nearly half the languages of the world, and it refers to what is true, firm, or faithful. In its intransitive form it means to be shored up—to be firm, unshaken. It means to be faithful, trustworthy, sure, something that one can lean on or build upon. In this sense it is used as a name for God in Isaiah 65:16, though the New International Version translates it by the word *truth.* The verse says, "Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth." But the Hebrews text actually says "by the God of the Amen." It is a way of saying that God is a sure and solid foundation for those who lean upon him. He is utterly reliable.

One of the most fascinating things about this word is how Jesus used it. He commonly prefaced something he was about to say by a double use of the words, as in John 3:3. The NIV has, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." But the Greek reads, "Amen, Amen, I say to you...," which the King James Version

rendered, "Verily, verily..." There are probably more than twenty or thirty sayings like this in the gospels.

We use this word at the end of something God says. In other words, when God says something he begins with "Amen, amen": "What I am about to say is true; pay attention." For our part, we hear the words, repeat them, and then say "Amen," meaning that we agree with God's declaration. We set our seal to our belief that the Word of God is true and that he is faithful.

That is what Paul is doing as he comes to the end of Romans and offers these last words of doxology. He is setting his seal to God's truth, saying that he believes God's Word. Can you do that? Can you add your "Amen" to what Paul has written?

For my part that is what I am determined to do. There is much in this world that I do not understand. There is much even about the ways of God that I do not understand. But what I do understand I believe, and to God's declaration of these eternal truths I say a hearty, "Amen." "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). Amen! "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Amen! "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Amen! "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). Amen!

"Then all the people said, 'Amen'" (1 Chron. 16:36).

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